



Speaking for Ourselves: *An Oral History of People With Cerebral Palsy*

Bob Williams-Findlay
Interviewed by Anne Austin

British Library ref. C1134/15/01-08

IMPORTANT

Every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of this transcript, however no transcript is an exact translation of the spoken word, and this document is intended to be a guide to the original recording, not replace it.

Should you find any errors please inform the Oral History curators:

Oral History
The British Library
96 Euston Road
London
NW1 2DB
United Kingdom

+44 (0)20 7412 7404
oralhistory@bl.uk

This interview and transcript is accessible via <http://sounds.bl.uk>.

© The British Library and Scope. Please refer to the Oral History curators at the British Library prior to any publication or broadcast from this document.

Interview Summary Sheet

Ref no:	C1134/15/01-08	Digitised from cassette originals	
Collection title:	Speaking for Ourselves: An Oral History of People With Cerebral Palsy		
Interviewee's surname:	Williams-Findlay	Title:	
Interviewee's forename:	Bob	Sex:	Male
Occupation:		Date and place of birth:	1951, Buckinghamshire
Date(s) of recording:	25 th September 2009, 20 th November 2005, 5 th February 2006, 25 th February 2006, 14 th May 2006		
Location of interview:	Interviewer's home, Birmingham		
Name of interviewer:	Anne Austin		
Type of recorder:	Marantz CP430		
Recording format :	D60 Cassettes	Number of cassettes:	8
Digitised as:	14 WAV files (16 bit 44.1kHz 2-channel, 1411kbps)	Mono or stereo:	stereo
Total Duration: (HH:MM:SS)			
Additional material:			
Copyright/Clearance:	Open. © The British Library Board and Scope		
Interviewer's comments:			

Tape 1 Side A [Track 1]

Today is Sunday 25 September 2005. I'm interviewing Bob Williams-Findlay at my house in Selly Oak, Birmingham and my name is Anne Austin. I'd like to start by asking you when and where you were born.

Well, I was actually born in Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire, although my family home was in Leighton Buzzard in Bedfordshire. My birth was rather complicated because my mother was in her early forties when she fell pregnant and she was meant to have a caesarean section but they forgot all about her. And in those days people went into a nursing home and the woman running the home got fed up with my mother being there and tried to induce her and it all went wrong. So they had to rush me to the main hospital in [inaud] and use forceps to deliver me, which of course resulted in the brain damage.

Did your mother know at the time that you had damage?

Yes. It was a very serious, both she and I was actually dying for the first few days then she recovered. It took me a while longer to become stable but they knew I had cerebral palsy quite early on. What they didn't know is the extent of the damage for quite a considerable time afterwards.

And has she told you or has your father told you anything about what they were told in the early days?

Yes we did talk about it and like in those days probably talking about the early Fifties, they very much saw cerebral palsy as being connected to like learning difficulties, as we would call it today. So they said not to expect too much of me. And I think one doctor may have got this from... actually implied that if they did want to leave me then the doctors would understand and get on with their life. But my mother in particular was a very strong woman and argued the case and after a year or so... very determined to prove that you know, I had a physical impairment but there was nothing wrong with how I thought and behaved.

Were they given any particular advice about how to look after you when you were a baby?

That I'm not really sure of. I mean they never really discussed that. Again I think in those days it was a case of just getting on with it. I know for a fair four, five years it was regular trips to the hospital for physiotherapy and – quite surprising to me – they did get respite care, which I think was quite interesting. Personally, I think they felt guilty. It was a medical cock-up and they felt rather than own up to that they actually tried to compensate in other ways by taking me in to hospital for a week to give my mother a break and that kind of thing.

And what memories do you have of... early memories of seeing doctors or...?

Not many.

[Inaudible.]

I mean I can remember probably, when I was about three or four being paraded up and down in front of a packed hall of doctors by some kind of specialist. But I also remember more what my mother [laughs] told me about my incident where I went to see the paediatrician who looked after me. He asked me to tell him what coins he had and he put a sixpence down and said, 'Robert, what's this?' So I said, 'It's a tanner.' And my mother said, 'Oh no Robert, it's sixpence.' And the doctor said, 'No mum, if Robert wants to call it a tanner, it's a tanner.' So [laughs] I think that showed her how I was.

So your mum wanted you to behave a bit more posh?

Yeah.

Does she tell you any other stories about the very early times?

Yes, a few. I mean apparently, once the local doctor came to have a... whether it was to see me or her but anyway... he came and we had the television on and much to his

shock I said, 'Oh it's David Dimbleby on the television.' He could not believe that someone so young could tell him who people were. So he quickly realised that I was actually quite intelligent.

And what about your father in all this?

My father was a very quiet man really – very difficult. I think it was only like later when I was like six, seven upwards that I can really remember much about dad and me. And when I eventually went to boarding school at six-and-a-half he was the one that took me on a Sunday afternoon. My mother would bring me back on the Friday afternoon when I came back. I think a fair few years I actually stayed there all the time except for holidays but then I began to go home for the weekend.

Do you know anything about how he felt or how your mother felt?

I think so. I mean I assume it was very difficult for them because I had two older sisters; one is probably about 12 years older than myself and the other is eight years older. And for a couple of years before my birth my father worked away from home, yet the marriage was not that secure over that period, so they actually lost touch. They were in contact but in terms of relationship it was a bit difficult. So when they were reunited – when my mother moved to where my father was actually living – they started up again. I think if they were honest they saw a new child as a way of bonding the relationship together and though they never said so, I think part of like what they had to deal with is the fact that this positive reunion actually in their eyes hadn't gone right. So I've felt, as I've got older that there was almost an element of guilt underneath. I'd say that particularly was the case on my father's side yet, obviously, he never, never talked about that.

When were you first aware that you had cerebral palsy? When was that kind of language used first?

I'm not really sure. It's very strange because I think the language that makes me laugh now [laughs] is... I think I saw myself as special and different but not in a negative way you know. It was OK in the early days. So it was really, if you like after I went to

school that I realised there were other children like me and that there was a difference between non-disabled people and disabled people. Up to that point it hadn't really dawned on me, I don't think.

So within the family you were treated like the rest or...?

I would say so. Well obviously, as I said, there was my support. I never felt like it was a big, big issue really.

How did you get on with your sisters?

Well my big sister Jean actually left the family home when I was about six and I had very little to do with her anyway before that. Mary the second sister has always been close to me. They love to come home. She says she rushed home from school wanting to take me out and I guess quite a lot of my young life she did act as a surrogate mother to take some of the pressure off my mum. So that's always been the kind of relationship we have really.

And were you – I mean she looked after you – were you or did you have a good relationship? Did you fight?

No, I think we had a [laughs] fairly good relationship though – dare I say this – Mary can be quite moody at times, so it was a case that on a Saturday morning when Mother was up town shopping and Mary was doing the housework for her, I stayed in bed out of the way, as I felt that was the safest Saturday to adopt [laughs]. So you know.

And what about reactions of others – family, relatives, friends, neighbours?

On the whole my family tended to keep themselves to themselves. They brought one couple who lived across the road from where we first lived – it was a shop – and they had no children of their own. So they would take me, look after me while my mum ran the corner shop – when she worked in effect. I seem to have got on with them

quite well and there's a photo somewhere of me hanging off their washing line. It's today but in those days it was considered quite funny.

And your father's work – what was his work?

My dad worked as a bulldozer driver. So because it was based on whether the weather was good or not, he tended to work seven days a week really, which I was always quite critical of. I actually felt he probably worked too much and therefore I didn't see him that much but like, often he would take care of me in the evenings when my mother would go out. Then we would play games together. I got quite good at dominoes, which is one of his favourite games.

When you say you were critical, was that at the time you felt his absence?

Yes and I did say so. I mean, I were quite an outspoken child as I've become an outspoken adult. I told it as I've seen it, even when it's got me into trouble. I haven't really been any different from that point of view.

And who would you say you might have got that from?

From definitely my mother. Yeah. She had a very quick tongue and she didn't suffer fools gladly and neither did I. She was a very passionate woman in what she believed in. I think that's really where I've got most of my social conscience from. My dad I think, though he probably voted like Labour, I think he was more to the right of my mother and myself in terms of ... Like, my social conscience has been there from a very early age. Like when I was eight years old going back to school one Sunday I saw a young man read a CND leaflet. I thought, 'Ah, how marvellous! What a great person!' So I knew what this meant even though I was only eight years old. Even when I was 14 I remember arguing with my dad as to why he should join a trade union [laughs]. So I always had this leftward political outlook.

So you were encouraged to be aware and to develop yourself?

I think I was. I watched television a lot and watched a lot of documentaries and yeah, I think that gave me a very sound background into history, which is one of my favourite subjects, yeah.

I'm wondering whether this might have been part of your mother's battle in the early days for you, and yours perhaps as well as a youngster.

I think it probably was. I mean I think she did have to battle hard. As I say, I think they weren't sure whether I had a learning difficulty or not and she battled to make sure that they knew I hadn't. So I think they were sort of frightened that she was too possessive but it seems the problem was... but we will come back to that. So when it was discussed that I went away to boarding school I think they had to do a lot of ground work with her to convince her that that was the best option as they saw it because she was a battler and she wouldn't like, accept anything they said, she would question it.

When you say 'they' at this point...?

I think they were... I mean we're talking about the Fifties still, so what you've got to remember is the education of disabled children was still in the hands of the health department. So it was them who called the tune – the doctors etc – determined the education of disabled children. That went on 'til the mid-Sixties, believe it or not.

So it was doctors who suggested about education for you?

Absolutely, yeah. Hard to believe; but true. We were really seen as medical problems.
[Laughs.]

I'm wondering whether your mother felt there was a better education elsewhere?

I'm not sure. I mean, for the first two years I had a house teacher who'd come to me I think three times a week and like teach me. That seemed to work. So I think she was really a bit concerned that I had to go away to Northamptonshire rather than be taught locally. But apart from that I'm not sure what her thinking was.

So the teacher came in to you from what sort of age?

I think about five.

And then it was felt that to go away would be...

Yeah.

Do you remember anything about your feelings about going to boarding school?

Yes, I hated it. I cried a lot and felt lonely. And you know, I think it really was a very difficult time for me those early years. I mean, I didn't want to be away and I guess up to the time I left that school I guess I felt betrayed you know. I thought they probably were wrong to send me away. So I felt detached from my family, I didn't feel part of it and when my sister started to get a regular boyfriend who came round to tea on a Saturday evening I felt out of it – second best. So I guess a lot of resentment had been really deep-rooted in me from that time about going, not really feeling I had a proper family life from that moment on to be honest.

So you were about six, seven when you went and then you left that school...?

Yeah. What happened was, I was about 11 and my class teacher started to become concerned about me because she knew I was bright. But because I seemed to be ahead of the class in most things she had to set work for me – separate to the others – while she taught them. So after a while I just got bored just doing like, written work, so I started I suppose [laughs] misbehaving in a variety of ways. And she reported that to the educational authority and recommended that they tried to find me a different school where actually matched my educational needs.

Before we move on to there; going away at a very early age you said you felt you hadn't got a proper family. Did you get any... or have you since talked to your parents about that and how you felt?

A bit. I mean it's always difficult because like, I didn't want to feel like I'm blaming them and making them feel guilty for the choices they made. At the end of the day I'm sensible enough to know that they didn't really have much choice than to do that.

[End of Tape 1 Side A]

Tape 1 Side B [Track 2]

We were just talking then about your first school and how you felt about it and your parents might have felt about it.

I've always found it hard to talk to my father anyway about emotional things and I... where ideas tend to [laughs]... tending to pass the buck a bit back to my mother or. I did talk to Mum but she just said basically, they had of choice you know. You know, I don't see any of my family really got to know me you know, after I went away. It was like snapshots of me, so they built up their own like, image of how my mum.... How they've seen me. I think that tended to be the case that my father and mother – they're both dead now – but even my sister...don't really think she knows me or whether she thinks she does.

And yet they weren't happy about you going away?

No that's right. I think it hurt them a lot and I think... I know that all of them regretted that it had to happen.

And what were the reasons given by the authorities who took the decision. Why did they think this a good choice?

I think they thought I would not be able to cope within a mainstream... and therefore special schools were always seen at that time as the only logical answer for disabled children.

You said you came home at weekends, is that right?

Yes.

And what kind of things did you do at the weekend?

Well, not much different to now. I've always had a passion for football, so I went down and watched the local football team on a Saturday afternoon when they were

playing at home and watched television, played records and doing mostly ordinary things that I think any disabled child in that year did really. I didn't have any real friends at home, so it was very much me on my own, making my own entertainment.

And when you were at school did you make friends there?

Yeah. At my first school I seemed to get on with like, most of the children there. We... but apart from them I think everything was OK. And I had my groups of friends and... I was thinking earlier of one girl called Gillian. As I say, I was six-and-a-half when I went to school; she was five. And the first day I remember we were put into the physiotherapy room for a session and we were told just to wait about 10 or 15 minutes while the physios had a break. So I sat on one corner I remember, this little girl Gillian sat on the other side. Then she came over, kissed me and ran away. Being typical me I just chased after her as I would. But the funny thing is the last person I saw when I left there about 11 was Gillian, so I kissed her again just to give it a nice bookends, you know. But I often wonder what happened to her.

I was going to ask you, are you in touch with her at all?

No, I lost touch with her but...

And so, the days at school; what kind of activities did you do?

As I say, I think the early between six and 10 I was OK, did my work and played games. But when I got older I think I got bored. I missed some of the day pupils, so I found the evenings quite hard and didn't really enjoy them again. Got into mischief and got told off and things like that. I think also the school was a little bit strange in the sense that the academic stuff... there was only a couple of teachers but I got on with them quite well. But they also had like parents during the day that were fine. Then they had night staff and I found one of them a real horror all the time I was there. I really hated her. People just don't realise what you go through because I remember you know – I wasn't that young I was about nine, 10 – when she used to literally make me and one other guy get up at half five. She would pull back the covers, take our pyjamas off, literally pick us up, put us on a cold wooden floor, throw

our clothes at us and say, 'Get dressed' because it took us so long to get dressed on our own. And then like an hour or an hour and a half later she would come back to do up our buttons. And all that time [inaud] sit down and wait while children who were more able to dress themselves were allowed to stay in bed an extra hour.

And this was a normal pattern?

Yeah, a normal pattern. So she worked half the week, so I couldn't wait for the other half when a more decent woman got us up.

Were you in general expected to be independent? Was that encouraged?

I think that was the general idea. I mean, it's very hard to tell actually. I think that school, compared to the next one I went to, didn't really have much of a philosophy. It was more like 'suck it and see' type attitude to care and learning really.

And the actual teachers; can you remember anything about them?

Yes. As I say, I had one or two quite good teachers. I felt their hearts were in the right place and one of them did actually do all she could to help me. It was her that recognised that I did have potential for writing and going forward, so she was the one that helped me get out of that school. Otherwise I could have been there up to the age of 19 quite easily.

It was an 'all-age' school?

Yeah, it was an 'all-age' school.

And what are perhaps some good memories? Do you have any good memories of being at that school or events that...?

I have some; I mean some very strange ones. I suppose one of the best was [laughs] actually meeting Richard Hearne – who was Mr Pastry so's you can remember him. And he was a really nice guy. We went to see him perform; he talked to us and got on

well with him. Another memory, which is typical me; exaggerating my part in things. We had this school activity – I can't remember much about it – but I had to play a knight, right? It was a really minor part but despite this fact I insisted my father made me a proper sword and shield and I told everyone that I was going to be a knight in this whatever-it-was.

And when things went wrong. I mean, you've suggested that you actually got fed up and did all sorts of things wrong; can you tell me what happened, what would happen to you then?

Yes and no. First of all I tended to – I think it's something that's still with me – I tend to go within myself. I sometimes tell people my woes but they tend to be more like easy things where I feel people can either give me sympathy or advice. But if anything really troubles me deeply I tend to go inwards and that's what I did. Now, shock horror, being like a 10-year-old, 11-year-old I discovered that girls and boys aren't made the same way and like, I wanted to know more about this difference. Well during the early Sixties wasn't the thing that 10-year-olds should be expected to do. And therefore when I was caught doing things I shouldn't have been doing, I got the full force of the school coming down on me. What happened was quite frightening really. Remember I was 10, 11. Today we think of that as being a little bit more street-wise than I think it was in the early Sixties. So I remember the day as if it was yesterday really. It was a Friday – Thursday or Friday – the woman who I told you about got me out of bed and like she started the usual routine. But added to that she came in and started saying, 'You disgusting little thing' and threw me on the floor and told everybody in my dormitory they were not to talk and particularly not to talk to me. Then, when in time we all went down to breakfast, they ordered everyone to line up and no one was to talk and it was my fault and this girl's fault that they couldn't talk. When we got downstairs they... me round the table. They'd put the tables round the edge with one in the middle, that me and this girl had to sit at [laughs]. And then we were told we had to sit there 'til everybody else had gone away after breakfast and then the matron would deal with us.

So they used sort of psychological discipline?

Yes, basically. So when I went home that weekend I just burst into tears and my parents said to me, 'What wrong?' They still don't know to this day 'cos I never told anyone what had happened. So, 'Thank goodness you're going to a new school otherwise we would have kicked you out.'

Who told you that, sorry?

The matron. So it was my parting shot. So my self-image at going to a new school was really at a low because I thought I had committed some kind of carnal sin. I'd done something very, very wrong and all the rest of it really.

Was that kind of discipline, I'm wondering whether that was normal in that school?

It didn't happen that much but it had happened before with other boys, two other incidents. I mean, I hadn't fell foul of it very often. The only time I had were and one thing I hated then – I still hate now – is boiled fish in milk. I can't stand it. So when we had like, that for tea I said, 'No I can't eat it.' Not that I wouldn't, I just can't eat it. And they said, 'You will eat it.' I said, 'No I won't.' And they said, 'You will sit there till you do.' So I said, 'Fine.' And they said, 'If you won't eat it you'll have it for breakfast.' I said, 'No point; I'm not eating it.' They said, 'Robert, if you don't eat it we'll fetch the matron.' To which I said, 'You can fetch the Queen of England, I still won't eat it.' And my troubles got worse because a friend of mine, trying to help me out, pushed this dumper truck over. I tipped the fish into his truck [laughs] and tried to hit it away. I got caught, so I was sent to my room. So it was a very Draconian-type discipline in that school.

I'm wondering whether you had anybody you did confide in, in that period?

One nurse. One nurse, Mrs Senior, I really liked and got on with. But that's about it really.

So there were house parents and night people and teaching staff?

Yeah.

And then you had you say, a nurse, particular...?

Well she was like the one that helped parents but she was a qualified nurse. I think I liked her 'cos she was Scottish like my mother, so you know, I think that helped me.

Apart from the term times, can you tell me a bit about do you remember much about what happened in the holidays and...?

Well we, again it was a mixture of things. I mean I spent most of my time on my own, playing with myself. Looking back I mean, this is a bit worrying to say this but it's a reflection of how time changes because my mum and me... She didn't think she was doing anything wrong but she used to go shopping most mornings, so she would leave me in bed and she'd be gone for a couple of hours. So I'd to like, stay in bed or then get up and do my own breakfast and do my own thing. So it was a very lonely existence in that sense. But I suppose what I really enjoyed was, as I said, I played dominoes with my father and got quite good; in fact I could beat him most of the time, which was quite funny because he was part of a dominoes team. And I can remember once he was in a competition against the town champion and like, of course, this champion beat him but my dad said, 'Well, you can beat me but I doubt you'd be able to beat my son.' He just laughed and said, 'How old is he?' My dad said I was about 10, 11 and he 'Oh come on.' He said, 'No, I'm being serious. Why don't you come round our house and I'll prove it.' So, [laughs] when the guy came he I did OK it was only a very simple game. They normally played what you call five and three and this was just the ordinary open run out game. But I did manage to beat him and he was really shocked at being beaten by a kid. But the biggest laugh was – this was few years later – that my father went to a working men's club and my mum quite often [inaud]. One time I went and I took part in this competition with local people in this club and they ended up quite annoyed because I think we played 15 games; my father won two, I won the other 13 – much to their annoyance – 'cos I think we played a shilling a game, so I cleaned up. And I don't think they invited me to go back after that [laughs] 'cos I was too good for them. So it was things like that that I really enjoyed, playing games. But I found like, on the whole, it was like me doing my own thing. I know I've been quite creative. I used to like reading what they call DC comics

like Superman, Batman this sort of thing. And I was about 13 when I invented a whole series of my own characters and started to make up stories about these characters, which I think is the start of me writing – being probably where I am now, [inaud] what I do, writing.

So you write quite a lot these days. But your early activities then you enjoyed was dominoes and there was books?

And make believe stuff, yeah.

Right. You didn't have any other toys or...?

Yeah. I mean I remember I had a big fire engine that I used to sit in and drive round the garden. Got a photo of me sitting half-in and half-out on the back step of our old house when I was about eight years old. I really did love that fire engine, yeah. Then of course, I had a bike that I went around on. Mum did have one friend who we used to visit. I used to go on my bike. I can remember one time, which was embarrassing for my mum but began to show what I'm like. It's that we were going down this road and this woman stopped us and out of the blue she just said to my mum, 'I am sorry dear. Is he mental?' And like, my mum just didn't know what to say or do. So I just looked at the woman, 'No, but you are.' [Laughs.] So my mother just didn't know where to put herself. The woman, well you've either we treated her.

Did you get many other comments like that? Do you remember being treated at all like that?

Yeah. I think you know, it was only par for the course. People either making comments or trying to...

[End of Tape 1 Side B]

Tape 2 Side A [Track 3]

You were just saying a bit about the way you were treated by people.

Yes. I can remember a story at the time you know, like I wasn't you know, wonderful – look at me – but now that I look back I'm quite horrified. As I said earlier I used to go to hospital quite regularly in the ambulance and apparently at Christmas time they made me sing *Away in a Manger* in the ambulance and give me money if I did it nicely. And you think, 'God, am I that cheap that I sold myself?' And perhaps that's why I ended up really such a performer, that I like having the audience you know, but...

Was this further treatment or was it physio?

I think mainly physio. I've been fortunate not to have any like operations as such; apart from time we had our tonsils out and that kind of stuff. But no, touch wood, I've been quite fortunate in that sense not to have... They did talk at one time about doing my tendons but fortunately my mother was wise enough to say no .

And did you have much difficulty learning to walk and so on or were you...?

This again is a funny story. Just before I went to school I was you know obviously there was developmental delay. So I was just learning to walk by holding the furniture before I went to school. And then when I went to school the physios gave me two sticks with a board between them, that I could [inaud] more or less learn to move more. It was a really awkward thing to do and I think I must have kept banging me ankle on the board. But anyway, one day – this would be like only about two or three weeks after starting this school – I walk in physio and I can remember it was in the dining room, I tripped over this damned board you know and I lay there hurt. And I just got on my knees, got these sticks, hurled them across the room and got up and walked out and never, never used them again. So when the Friday came for me to go home they said to my mother you know, wait here Bob will come to you. And I came walking out to her and she said that was one of her proudest moments. From that moment I just walked towards her, yeah.

And we've talked quite a bit about that first school and it was obviously looking as though you should go on to somewhere else a bit more demanding. Can you tell me a bit about that decision-making process and then moving on to the next school?

Yes. It was really quite strange because I was 11 and I for what was going on, and now everybody was talking about me getting assessed. I mean some why or how, anything, so I went up to London and did various tests including IQ tests and that...

Can you tell me where that was? Where did you go to that...?

Oh Heaven knows. I don't remember. It was wherever the Spastics Society headquarters was. I think they've gone; it's a long time ago.

It's the Spastics Society that you went, yeah?

Yeah. Something Crescent [Park Crescent, London] but I can't remember this name. I did the tests and then they must have had a conflagration and they called me and my parents in and started talking about... I must have been so anxious about this, I actually went deaf for that hour; I didn't hear anything that was going on. And then once we got out I said, 'Well, what's happening? Am I going to a new school?' I'd no idea 'cos I'd got so nervous. It was even further away from home; it was in Tonbridge in Kent. Unlike the last school it had its own school uniform, so we had to go to London and try on this school uniform. Had a maroon blazer and grey trousers, grey shirt, maroon tie. Oh boy! So... to already like, question about my ability really. I thought, 'Am I going to be able to cope here?' And like, I did go into like top – there were two streams, A and B – and I went straight into the A stream and you know, I can't say I was a wonderful student for most of the time I was at Delarue; I think I...

Can you remember your first days there you know, you had anxieties before. Can you remember going there on the first day?

No. It's really strange; I think I blocked most of it out. It was really strange. I don't remember the first year at all. I remember the second year but that first year is almost a complete blank.

What was the school like?

Well it was a new school, it had just moved into this school from down the road, so everybody was quite excited about being there. And all I can remember is the odd thing like the headmaster addressing us, telling us we were the crème de la crème and... be proud of being there. And the only memory I've got is that one boy getting disciplined and seeing the headmaster walking down the road with a bent broolly 'cos he had slapped this boy's bottom with it 'cos he'd lost his temper with him. [Laughs.] But that was unusual; that didn't happen.

Didn't usually have corporal punishment?

Oh no, no. So the first year disappeared, second year I think I settled down. It was strange. The classroom we had was in the arts and crafts room, so it was like a mixture of desks and artists' things. And like, we got on quite well as a group of people.

How many were there roughly in your class?

I think at the time there was only about eight of us, as far as I can remember. It got bigger later on but eight of us. And I think it was that year I started to write poetry for the first time. I had my own big electric typewriter that I used to do my work on.

And your teacher then?

Yeah, most of the teaching was OK and most of them stayed throughout the year, time I was there. And like you know, teaching of Delarue, I actually think up to the last year or so was actually very good and very helpful. I think all the teachers were good and two English teachers were excellent. I know I was difficult 'cos grammar has never been my most favourite subject. I can remember being like, incredible. One teacher called J... Smith, who would only [inaud] art. Typical teacher who like, had been like, decorated because of war activities and all this sort of thing. [Laughs.] I can remember when we were doing verbs like and she went round each of us in turn giving us a letter. We had to come up with a verb starting with that letter and of

course it got to me and I got F and I just looked horrified and she... 'You got it!'
[Laughs.] They asked you know I understood what a verb was but I just appreciate the fact that she could do that, was human enough to do that. So I held her in very high regard. And the other English teacher used to work on a literary magazine and again she encouraged me to write poetry and short stories. I think it was either the third or fourth year – I can't remember which – they always put a pantomime on and she came to me – it was in fourth year – and she said, 'Bob, I'm trying to write this love song and I've written the first verse but I can't write the second. Will you write it for me?' And she played like, the first bit and I wrote the second bit. So...

So you enjoyed English and writing?

Yeah, and that...

Were there any subjects you didn't enjoy?

Yes, I'm useless at languages, so French, German, Latin were never really my forte and maths wasn't that hot either. So you know, as I say, school wasn't really me. I was more a boy for being outside playing football, cricket, riding, knuckling down to academic-type work really.

You say you didn't like aca...

Not much, no.

Did you, I mean, were there many sort of particular things, particular events or excursions or anything you went out on?

Yes. I could say quite a lot about Delarue from quite a number of angles. I mean I always felt a little bit like a fish out of water. I always felt there were some pupils who were accepted and liked and encouraged, and there was others that were not treated the same way. And I think if you like, played the game, came from the right sort of background, toed the line and were prepared to say, 'Yes sir, no sir, three bags full' and you know, play the game in every sense of the word, you were like, up there

and you got the privileges. You got to go swimming; you got to go to events. But if you needed that bit more support, if you weren't prepared to toe the line and you asked too many questions then I think you fell down the pecking order. So me being a big gob, who actually asked questions, who was very independent and who didn't have much obvious respect for authority – tended to get slapped down from time to time.

I know you were saying earlier that at your earlier school, that it was because you were bored that you would mess around. Do you think in this school that it was something you learned to do because for various reasons or was that part of your nature and your perception?

I think it's partly who I was and what I was. Like, this might sound awful but most of my peer group were willing just to do what they were told, do their work, take part in nice activities. Where you know, I'd want to know what, why has this happened, how come you know, you let A get away with this but B can't. You know and like, I'm... the one who [inaud] the second year would go to the headmaster and say, 'Isn't it time you put sex education on the curriculum 'cos we're getting older and it's a bit silly that nobody talks to us about what we should and shouldn't know.' And though they did it, I think it like earmarked me out as the troublemaker, yeah and the one who was the shop steward of the school-type situation, you know. And that stayed with me all through my time at Delarue.

I'm wondering how far you felt you had to conform with that stereotype that...?

What, being seen as a rebel? I don't think I deliberately went out of my way to do that; I just think the school had a very odd way of relating to us. I mean there's lots of examples where they would be on about teaching us independence. The last thing they wanted us to be was actually independent. So you know, one of the headmasters, his brother was quite outspoken on like, the Middle East and at the time there was this Jewish girl in the school who was about two years younger than me. I got on well with her, started to go out with her. It was very common. Immediately I was told, 'This is out of order, you shouldn't do anything like that, she's Jewish and you're not and you're older than her, you're too old to have her as your girlfriend, will you stop.'

And I said, 'No, why should I? It's her choice and it's my choice. Who are you to tell me who I can be friends with?' And that got me into all kinds of trouble.

Was it a member of staff who told you that?

Oh yeah and we... I got to the stage where I had the deputy matron pull me to one side – I remember 'cos we were standing on a bridge – she just pushed the girl over the bridge to the girls' dormitory and left her walking back – and the deputy matron said, 'Doesn't it bother you?' I said, 'What bother me?' She said, 'She's a Jew and you're a Christian.' I said, 'Yes. So?' And she said, 'Well doesn't it bother you that you're likely to go to Hell if you carry on with this relationship?' I said, 'What are you talking about? This is a ridiculous argument to use.' And then you know, a few months later, going back to my poetry, I let another young student read some of it. There was one poem; it was like basically a fantasy. Now I think it had a line in it, 'I love to walk naked in the grass and feel the sun on my back and the freedom of the air upon my face'. And [inaud] read it over [inaud] decided she was too young to read such filth, took it off her. So the girl the next morning came to me crying that they'd taken it off her and she was sorry that they'd taken it away. And I got called into the headmaster's office, told that this was inappropriate behaviour and I could only have my poetry back at the end of term if I took it home, never to bring back and never to write any more while I was at school. So you know, the whole morality was just utter oppressive nonsense, which went right through the school.

And so, I'm wondering whether you became less happy there or whether it's looking back that you feel...?

I wasn't happy there. I felt victimised, I felt inhibited and of course, that had an impact on how I studied. I mean, you know, as I said I wasn't the greatest of learners but I got through the first term exam. I got English Lit. and Lang. – just got through – but I got them. Then the next year I took four exams and they said we're putting you in for maths but we don't expect you to pass, it's to give you experience. So when the results came out I got my results at home. I'd passed all four. Oh great!

Was this O level?

O level.

Yeah.

So I thought I'll go back and everybody else will have four O levels like me. And when I got back the headmaster said, 'Oh, well done Bob' but almost through gritted teeth and it was only like half an hour later when I met this guy Hugh, he said, 'Well Bob, you and me, we're top of the class eh?' I said, 'But what do you mean?' He said 'Well you and me, we're the only two that passed everything. The others failed maths.' I passed maths and yet everybody else failed, yet I was 14th out of 15 during mocks but I managed to get through. So that was fillip . But then what came next just knocked the stuffing out of me. 'Cos we'd gone into the upper sixth to do A levels and the headmaster decided who the prefects were and he wanted six prefects. One of my mates had decided he'd had enough, he left the school. He just came back to do his re-sits in November and left – he was gone. So there was six of us left in the class, six prefects wanted. So the headmaster made five out of my class and one from the class below. Never explained to me why, never called me in to explain why, that was left to the deputy headmaster to do, who did it by apologising to me and said that it was one of his saddest days at school.

[End of Tape 2 Side A]

Tape 2 Side B [Track 4]

You were talking about the headteacher's decision.

Yeah, the deputy headmaster called me over and said, 'I don't know what to say to you because I think this is unjust and you're being victimised but I can't do anything, I'm only the deputy, but try and hang in there and bear it out if you can.' But you know, it really as I say knocked the stuffing out of me. From what it meant, I mean, not only did it make me look like, bad in front of the whole school, but it also had implications. 'Cos the prefects had a room which I wasn't allowed to go in, it meant that when there were certain events only for prefects, I had to work on my own in the class while they were out having a meal with the headmaster and such like. So basically the last two years at my school, while we were doing A levels, I gave up basically; I thought there was no point to it.

And again was there nobody you felt you could speak to, confide in?

No I actually confided in my fellow students, who again thought it was wrong, but apart from the deputy head none of the staff entertained it. Nobody ever really like, spoke to me or gave me encouragement really. I managed to get an O level pass in geography. And again, I felt a bit bitter about that – if I dare use that word – because as it turned out, I had to use an amanuensis to write. So when I was doing geography A level I had a question and I decided I wanted to do it a certain way. There was a method and this guy talked me out of it, even though that wasn't his right to do it. He said, 'Oh come on Bob, don't be stupid they wouldn't want you to spend all your time doing it that way; do it a quicker way, it'll be all right'. And as it turned out I was right. And if I had done that, as I wanted, I would have had A level geography but I did his and missed out. A level history, well, everyone passed that and that's because I think he did his own thing. I think the teacher that year had his own problems. He had glaucoma and going blind and basically he just told us to read the encyclopaedia and of course, that wasn't adequate for A level. So on the whole, yes I got good O levels, I think I got a good basic education. But I really felt that I was let down by Delarue. The only interesting thing was that there was this local businessman who was also called Delarue. Nothing to do with this school but because of his name he took an

interest and he used to take pupils out for tea on a Sunday. And for some reason – best known to him – I think he realised what was happening to me and he used to take me out more than anybody else. And once I was up town and he stopped the car and gave me a lift back to school. So he like was one of the few positive people to actually take an interest in me but it was interesting that it was somebody outside the school who actually played that role for me.

And what about friends of your own age your own classmates?

Well, on the whole I got on really well. I think you know I fitted in. They saw me for what I was – a bit of a lad, yeah, made them laugh, infuriated them at times – but they knew I was a character. Can't say I had any real enemies among the pupils.

Do you keep up with any of them now? Do you know them?

Not recently. I know a couple and like, I've had contact with one or two over the years. Sadly one or two have passed on. One or two we parted because our views have radically altered, as we've got older. Like my best friend, he as I said left, he had had enough and I got into trouble 'cos I covered for him. I didn't tell anyone until I knew he was safely on the train. So that didn't endear me any more to the headmaster I guess [laughs]. But we met a couple of years later and he was a bit shocked at how political I'd become and he was meant to stay a week and he only stayed a couple of hours, so that was the last time I saw him. But some of the others I've like kept in contact with in different ways, different times.

And presumably you didn't go home at weekends like...

No, no. That again [inaud] in a gang more. I went to football because that's you know; football was number one to me. Still is. [Laughs.] So you know, had some fun, was in the local school football team, chess team, played cricket. I organised the... we had a five-a-side league at school that I organised and you know, tried to be fair but as it happened my team did win, but that was because I was good in goal so.

And that was the kind of thing you did at the weekend was it?

Yeah.

Did you have to go to church on Sundays or...?

Yes. Yes. That was problematic 'cos by the time I got to 16 I didn't want to go. Asked my father if he would tell the school I didn't have to go and he refused to do so. So in the end I got round that by declaring that I wasn't going to be C of E any more. I would go to Methodist or Baptist or Salvation Army or 'hug a tree', anything but to have to go in school buses that was so embarrassing and like, be herded up and carted off.

Was your family religious at all?

Mum was; Dad wasn't. And it wasn't that I didn't have a faith, it was that I just hated churches. Found them boring and pointless and a waste of time and space. But I did go and see the Salvation Army a few times; had some fun; they were different. I liked experimenting, having different like experiences. Sometimes we... to bunk off and go in the park and like, walk around. To be honest, I think that did me as much good as sitting there listening to some text in the Bible that meant very little to me.

Were there other times as well where you had to sort of represent the school or you went off sort of as a group in the school bus, something like that?

Yeah. I played in the local chess league, went swimming and we did a swimming gala once. Managed to come second out of two, which [laughs] said more about my swimming technique. But football, I represented the school in goal and once we played at [inaud] and we'd have football coaches, which shows how old I am. They nicknamed me Bonetti after Peter Bonetti, the England goalkeeper 'cos it was funny, at the start of the game they was trying to pass the ball into the net and of course I just stopped it and by the end of the game they were just kicking it as hard as they could. [Laughs.] They still didn't beat me. So that was probably my claim to fame. One other incident where I did let myself down when we were playing football against the local disabled people's college and we gave away a penalty. And I dived and it just went

under my body. I swore and I heard the headmaster right from behind me go, 'Oh bad luck Robert.' I thought, 'God'. I didn't know he was there or I would not have used the [laughs] expletive I did but that was me.

[End of Tape 2 Side B]

Tape 3 Side A [Track 5]

Sunday 20 November 2005. I'm interviewing Bob Findlay in my home in Selly Oak and my name is Anne Austin. There are a couple of things perhaps from last time that I'd like to raise, if that's OK and then we'll move on?

Yeah.

Firstly a couple of factual details; the name and the size and so on, of your first school.

My first school was called the John Greenwood Shipman Home. And I think there was about 20 children within it.

And where was it?

It was in Northampton itself. Or just outside perhaps.

And I know you were born in 1951 but could you give me the date of your birth?

Yes, with a name like Robert Burns it's the 25 January.

And does that give...

Yeah. It's very peculiar because it's a strange story because when my father was born, apparently he had sideburns as a baby and they called him Robert Burns. And I was meant to be born Christmas but they couldn't have two of us born on the 25 December, come on. So I didn't obviously want to come out for a month. And when things went wrong it was actually Burns' night, so it just happened I got called after my father because it was Burns' night. I think originally I was going to be born John, which is my grandfather's name, so I'm glad I stuck it out.

And I mean, were your parents Scottish, had Scottish links?

Yeah, both Scottish. I regard myself as Scottish despite living all my life in England. I am not a Sassenach.

Did you ever visit in Scotland?

Only once... They were a bit sad because I didn't see either of my father's parents – they died before I was born. But my mother's parents, I actually saw them only a few weeks before they died, which was rather strange but yeah, we went up to see them and they both died within six weeks after that visit, so that was sad.

And what part of Scotland was this?

It was Paisley in Renfrewshire. That's where my father and mother met. Dad worked at a steel-making firm on the Clyde and my mum's father was the actual foreman of the company. At first they don't seem very ideal. My father was going out with my mother. I think he felt she was a bit too good for him, to be honest. One of those things. We're talking about you know, the late Twenties, so quite a long time ago.

And what made them come south?

I think work mainly. I'm not really sure but that's the impression I've got and they travelled all over the place apparently; Warrington, they even had a period near Wolverhampton, in Willenhall I believe. So you know it's one of those things where I've got bits of history but not really much. I mean, that I think is one of the problems of not being around. And like, my mother would talk about things but it tended to be her agenda, so you know, you have bits of history over and over again but not necessarily the full picture. I think my sister Mary feels very much the same. She's only got a partial history really.

And tell me, what was your mother's name and her background?

She was called Sarah Scott and she preferred to be called Sally because she didn't like the way people said Sarah. 'Ay, ay Sarah, as it then ...' She had a rather large family, Scottish Protestants, sisters and brothers. Very musical family as they were in those

days. Her sister played the piano, her father played the banjo. He was actually part of a number of famous bands in Scotland during the Twenties, yeah.

Did they do gigs or how...?

Yeah, apparently they did in. Though they were never part of the Jimmy Shand Band, I think they were contemporaries. They didn't know him but it was that style of music so. [Laughs.]

And your sisters, one's called Jean and one's called Mary.

Yeah.

Can you tell me a bit more? You've said something about you don't feel you know your sisters very well or...

No I don't know either that well really. I know Mary more than Jean. As I've said before, I was about six when Jean left home – she was 12 years older than I was and very much into her own thing – I have very few recollections of her. I think the only one I can remember is when I was a child, is sneaking into her bed once and . And like, the rest of it was when she married we would visit her. When her husband was stationed in Bedford they had their first child, Charles. And then of course she went to America to live; then they went to Cyprus and Berlin. No, not Cyprus; Crete then Berlin. And I've only seen her twice since then, so yeah, hardly any contact whatsoever. Quite interesting though 'cos what we're talking about when I was like six, seven years old. I'm now back in contact with her eldest son who I email – correspond with – which is quite interesting.

And he must be not a lot younger than you. Is that right?

That's right. He's only about seven years younger. He actually looks a lot like me; it's really strange.

Have you met him?

No I haven't yet, no.

Is your sister still alive?

Yes. But you know, she isn't very good at keeping in contact and that. Mary as I say, I have more to do with, you know and like, up to when she moved to Worthing. If I went to see my parents she used to be in the same neighbourhood. I didn't go home much, you know, probably once a year, yeah, that's...

And these days?

These days it's a bit distant. I mean I visited her whilst you were away, so it was only a couple of weeks ago I saw her and my nieces who've got three children, so I've seen one of them before but seeing the other two was quite nice. You know, I mean, I guess I'm not someone that really makes a big deal of being part of a family because I just never really felt like I was.

This may affect my next thoughts. I was wondering about any family outings or activities you used to take, when you were a child?

Not many actually. Bob, myself and my parents, once or twice Mary and her husband but rare. Before that there was an awful incident when Mary and her best friend took me off to meet our father from work. He was working in a sand pit cum clay pit and I don't really know what happened but Mary and Celia wandered off to see him and I got lost and ended up covered in muck and . Dad went absolutely spare at both of them, so [laughs] that was one vivid memory if you like. But you know, it was mainly like going on holiday in the summer with Dad and Mum. You know, they tried to do their best but you know, I think I'm no different to any other kid. You don't really want to be stuck with your parents 'cos they want to do one thing and you want to do something totally different, 'specially when you're a teenager. And you know I found it a bit excruciating I'll tell you. 'Must I go to watch a ye-old-musical-hall-type thing? No thank you!' That's what I said.

And Christmases as well, still at...?

Tend to be rather like traditional routine-ism. I hate Christmas. I realise I find routine-ism is the death to enjoyment. You know, where you're doing the same thing year in; year out. Then, you know, just a complete.... And the routine was that, one day we would go to my sister's and the next day we would go to her in-laws, and that was the tradition for about 10 years. And like you know, it was not my favourite time of year, let's put it that way. But any kid... Mum was very creative and like, we used to have like pillowcases – both me and the girls – filled with presents and nuts and oranges and little things and yeah, it was a time to remember, and I think that's it really. But Christmas is about being young. I can remember – relating back to school – that we used to have a Father Christmas come to school. And unfortunately, me and my girlfriend who was five – I was seven – we let the cat out of the bag; Father Christmas didn't exist. Oh boy! Didn't we half get into trouble.

As you were growing up Bob, you give an impression of being quite solitary in some ways. I'm wondering how you feel your sense of yourself and your beliefs really grew, as you were a teenager and growing up.

It's strange isn't it? I often wonder that myself. I mean, I think I've said before, I think I got a lot from my mum rather than my dad. My dad was a good dad as far as it went; he played with me, cared about me. Like many men of his age he wasn't very good at... [inaud] what felt OK. He always like, [inaud] from other people. I don't remember him ever saying he loved me for instance but you know, I think that's what men were like in those days. Mum was outspoken like me. She was quite radical and very, though today it would not be considered that radical but then it was. She was a member of the Labour Party, a member of a co-operative society and now I think that may be where I got my radicalism from, I don't know. But I don't remember talking that much about social issues but for some reason that's my politics into me. You know I've got it somewhere and just can't explain how and why I have this firm socialist belief that I've had since I was eight years old and still have it.

Did she encourage you in your radicalism?

I don't think she encouraged me or discouraged me. I think she wanted me to be, if you like, a free thinker; to think for myself, to have principles and that kind of thing

but I never felt indoctrinated in any shape or form. Really my two sisters are so different from me you know, they're [inaud]. My eldest sister – the time before last when I met her – we just had one God Almighty row. 'Cos like you know, it's like a socialist versus a raging [inaud]. God Almighty! And my sister's not that radical. So it's very hard to know where my belief system came from really.

I'm wondering if the time in which you were growing up also was influential.

I think it probably was. I mean, I don't think I said this last time but my last two days at the John Greenwood Shipman Home was the time when there was the Labour contest between Wilson and... can't remember the other guy's name now. No, gone. But when I heard Wilson's voice at first I thought he was the Prime Minister. I remember running round the classroom going, 'Yeah!' 'cos I you know, dare I say it, been anti-Tory since I could think. [Laughs.] And like, that there was just like 10-, 11-year-olds who were like cheering on the Labour Party. I met Harold Wilson and it appeared in one of the Spastics Society newspapers. Can't remember; was it called *Spastics News*? Great title, *Spastics News*! I think so.

That would be when you were about 10, 11?

Probably, about that.

I was wondering whether we could perhaps jump a bit now and think about the time when you were approaching leaving school and then the choices after that?

Yes.

Did you get any sort of careers advice or talk about what you might do after school?

No. I mean, I was thinking about this earlier because it was a very unsettling time for me. Me, as ever, went and said I felt my last two years at school were amongst the most traumatic... various difficult years but those two in particular. I feel that I was abused psychologically by the headmaster, by some of the staff who you know, I'm going to say I feel from their own fear of sexuality, prejudicial anti-Semitism, fear of

young people growing up... all on to me. And you know, I felt I was singled out. You know, I'm not going to pretend I was an angel or I didn't make mistakes; I obviously did. But to treat a young 16-, 17-year-old the way I was treated, if that happened today I think basically it would be classed as abuse. I actually do believe Scope owed me – not just me – I felt other people got a raw deal at the Thomas Delarue School as well. I think they owe us an apology for the way we were treated. And because that happened – because I felt victimised – I felt ostracised you know. When I did my O levels I was OK. When it got to A level I really don't think I got the support or teaching I should have had. You know, we were left to our own devices often in history. But I just felt crushed and really the careers advice was 'pants'. You know, 'Just what do you want to do?' We'd got no idea. So really, I made my own choices. I guess I was frightened about going home. Going home to a family I didn't really know, a town that I really only had a partial insight into. I was frightened that if I'd have gone home that would have been it, I would not have had a real future; I thought I may have been held back. And I decided to go where my heart took me. And seeing that I fancied this woman – a fellow student – I knew where she was going, I thought why not go with her and if anything happens then that's a bonus and that's what happened. I laugh now but I went to Kelvedon, to a further education centre again run by the Spastics Society, called Oakwood. There was about 12 people there of various backgrounds. And I went – God help me – to do computer programming. Can you believe it, me, computer programming? What on earth was I thinking of? And, of course, nnh, nnh, it didn't work. I was not up to that; it was alien. So I floundered for about a year and at the same time my father became seriously ill and eventually died. I did actually get it together with the woman and we did get engaged – much to her parents' shock, angst really. They didn't see me as a suitable partner. And I think the experience also shows a different light on my mother and also a very negative light on the Spastics Society. When I got engaged, apparently the social worker who came to see me, I think for an hour.... middle-aged social worker came to talk to me about why I had decided to get engaged. And then she went behind my back to my mother and like, said did she know I'd got engaged yeah, and wasn't she worried that I was probably an over-sexed young man. Now, how one works out that somebody's over-sexed from an hour meeting is beyond me but really that isn't the agenda is it. The agenda is that at that time right – we were talking about the late Sixties, early Seventies – disabled people should be asexual. They should not have independent

thoughts yeah? So me showing an [inaud] in that department, again was a 'no no'. So when it comes to like, sexuality, Scope just could not cope then.

[End of Tape 3 Side A]

Tape 3 Side B [Track 6]

[Bob coughs.]

Are you all right?

Yep. Well, having been told that her son was apparently over-sexed, my mother said, 'Well if that's your opinion of my son, it isn't mine. If you're so narrow-minded and bigoted do you mind leaving my house this moment.' And she threw her out.

[Laughs] Yeah, that's my mother for you, you know, she'll defend her own, yeah?

That was a difficult time because I was in this relationship, her parents didn't approve, my father had died – that really cut me up, yeah. My emotions were in a total turmoil; I ended up having a nervous breakdown. I had to go into hospital for a few weeks – at least probably two – I can't really recall to be honest. And of course, yeah, my mood swings were quite high, so in the end I left Oakwood as a result. Needless to say that really put some pressure on the relationship and it did collapse and we went our own way, yeah.

When you look back on that experience, what are your thoughts now?

Very difficult really. I mean, I probably recognise how immature I really was and I feel . I also think it highlights, not just for me but a lot of disabled people in that situation, just how desperately isolated and alone we are. I don't know, maybe it's me, maybe not but I do think we don't have the support that perhaps non-disabled people would have had. You know, you can go and talk to your mum or your dad. Maybe I'm seeing things through rose-tinted specs I don't know but I've just got, I get this sense that you are alone – you have to like, look after yourself. You have nobody really to like, support you. One or two of the staff at Oakwood were good and did try and support me. A nurse was less helpful you know. I think the guy running the place was a really nice man, a really caring man but out of his depth when it came to like personal relationships. So it was a really awful time for me really. And like you know within a year of leaving school I was like, out in the world in a sense. Again I didn't want to go home, so I ended up being taken in by this guy called Bernard Brett who was a Quaker, he lived in Colchester. He had cerebral palsy, too. And he was one of

the most loveliest guys I've ever met in my life. Different views to me, different politics but you know, he was a real gem of a guy, caring guy.

How did you come to meet him or...?

I was starting to get political around disability. My girlfriend-cum-fiancée at the time was saying to me, 'Well if you've got all these views about disability, why don't you do something about it?' I started to get slated for my own view that disability was about oppression; that disabled people weren't treated the same way as non-disabled people and that I thought there was an economic edge and a social edge to the way in which we were treated. And she said, 'Well why don't you do something about it?' So I got involved with the local disablement income group that was actually run by Bernard in Colchester, so we used to go to meetings at this house from Oakwood. And when I had nowhere else to go he took me into his spare room and I stayed there for three months until he found a family I could move in with, which I did, in Wivenhoe. It's near Colchester.

So by this time you had left Oakwood

Yeah.

And you were living in Colchester, Wivenhoe yeah?

Yep.

Were you working?

No, I was unemployed. I was looking for work but people would take one look at me and say, 'No thanks.' So I was drifting you know. And the first family I stayed with, the husband had multiple sclerosis and we don't really know what happened but I think the wife found it difficult living with him and me, so I was moved on to another family in Wivenhoe, which was OK. I didn't mind that you know, it...

Can you tell me a bit about, I mean were you choosing to go to these families or was somebody organising it for you?

No. Bernard organised it for me. At the time I just felt so adrift and it was only when I moved in with Christine and Bill that I started to find my own feet again – started to be me for the first time for about a year. It was just like rebuilding my own self, self-image and self-belief in myself, yeah. And then my lifestyle was a bit Bohemian like, into the old drinking at night down the pub, messing around during the daytime, writing poetry and that was about it really. But one day I was in this pub and I got talking to a group of young female students. I happened to have my poetry with me and they said, ‘Could we have a look please?’ So I showed them my poetry and they said, ‘Bob, if you can write poetry like this, why don’t you do a degree?’ ‘Pardon me! Do a degree?’ ‘Why not?’ they said. So it was the first time anyone really said anything that positive. I think I left Delarue feeling a bit of a loser, to be honest. I failed my A levels, so I only had O levels. Well, the next day I decided to catch the bus up to the university – this is bizarre really – I just wandered on campus and said, ‘Can I talk to someone about doing a [laughs] degree?’ I met this guy, Colin Bell, and we were talking, he said, ‘Tell you what’ he said, ‘go back, write an essay on you and why you want to do a degree, bring it back and we’ll talk further.’ So I did that, went back, he read it – the piece of work I did – he said, ‘Right, you’ve got two choices. One is you can go to local college and do an A level and then come back within that year, or you can come here start of next term and do three months, see how you get on and we’ll take it from there.’ So I decided I would prefer that route rather than do an A level. So I went and I sat in on American Literature and I had to write two essays. At the end of that time I went back to see Colin and I said, ‘What do you think?’ and he said, ‘Start next academic year.’ ‘Fine,’ I said, ‘do I have to do American Literature?’ ‘Cos other than the time I’ve been here [inaud] wouldn’t mind doing sociology and history.’ He said, ‘Given the standard you’re at, be my guest.’ And that’s how I ended up at Essex University.

And can you tell me a bit about the time that was...?

Yes. Exciting time. It was the early Seventies, so we had the miners’ strike, Post Office strike, Vietnam war was going on, so that was a real radical feel about the

time. I was mixing with non-disabled people really for the first time in my life, in any major way. So that was happening. Also I had taken up what Carol had said, that I wanted to know more about like, politics around in general and around disability. And I had read a letter in – I don't know how, this is something I would love to remember, I can't – it was a letter that appeared in *The Guardian*, written by a guy called Paul Hunt and I somehow got hold of it, read it and everything he said I totally agreed with. And at the bottom he said, 'Write to me if you agree with what I'm saying.' So I wrote to Paul and I got a meeting with him and that meeting changed my life forever. I know it sounds like a cliché but that's true really. I mean it wasn't like an instance you know, like the road to Damascus because I did get involved with what became the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation. And you know, I wrote a couple of angry like, 'in your face' pieces for their newsletter, just as they informed me they really hadn't taken off. I got so frustrated with the slowness and what I was arguing then, which to some degree I still believe, I was saying that I didn't think disabled people could win our battle on our own, that we had to go into coalition with other oppressed groups and include other disabled people. 'No, no, we got to defend our rights; they don't understand our issues.' Which to be fair is probably true, yeah. So we were caught between the disability movement that was being born and a radical left-wing politics in university and I chose the latter. I joined a revolutionary Marxist group at university, yeah. Basically went down that route whilst I was at university.

And so this was while you were at Essex?

Yep.

I'm wondering how you were accepted, looked on by other students, other members of staff?

A few were quite interested because like I had mixed feelings about Essex because in terms of me and my impairments and how I got on with the other students, the way my education... [inaud] I think they were brilliant. I really think Essex was far more advanced than most educational places I've seen. I think they were supportive, I think the staff did actually make reasonable adjustments; I was accepted by staff and students really. Which in a way was quite interesting because there's a paradox I think

because I was treated as just one of them, when I was singled out as an activist and trouble-maker [laughs] then all kinds of dynamics took place that are very unique. Because on the one hand there was I, part of a radical student movement who was objecting to the way in which overseas students were being charged higher fees than [inaud] students, so we occupied the university. They expelled two students and we decided to campaign against that and we set up a picket line and over a two-day period 106 students were arrested including myself [laughs]. So we had all that going on and like I was treated no different than any other student except when [inaud] getting stronger, there was two episodes of student unrest. I was involved in both. In one I think I just got reprimanded and that ended up in court for picketing and got a two-year conditional discharge. And then a bit later – in one night where all hell broke loose and some students went on a rampage and smashed hundreds of windows – I was a member of the executive at the time, so I was going around keeping an eye on what was going on, not encouraging anyone whatsoever but I got arrested didn't I, again, for criminal damage, which I was innocent of. And again we had to go to court and we had two trials. They were inconclusive – me and this other student – and we were both in the end acquitted of any charges. But that, if you like, sealed my persona, so next time there was student unrest then they said well, we're going to discipline you because we've seen you there, you were... I would say, 'Well, it's not hard to see someone with cerebral palsy is it, whether I had a leading role or not?' And this was at the [inaud] and I had finished my degree by then, got my degree. I was doing MA the second time around. And I got expelled. So it was a strange thing but I've left a bit out. After the first round of unrest they called Lord Annan in to do a report on this trouble at Essex, and in this report he spoke about how the left-wing students had used a – I quote – 'cruelly crippled student to gather sympathy for their cause'. Now, not only did this outrage me as a person but one of the pro vice-chancellors was so outraged by this he was fuming. said, 'I may not agree with what you do but you're one of the most articulate political people I know. How dare they dismiss you in this phoney way and to say you're gathering sympathy.' know that if they disagree with me they would shout me down like anybody else. So you know, I was a political animal. And he did backfire on them because – I don't know if you remember but – there was a time when *The Times* newspaper called upon the University of Essex to be closed down? No? Yes and the reason was that it was at the time when there was a whole debate about no 'platform for fascists' and people at Essex quite rightly argued

that 'though we didn't like Sir Keith Joseph, he wasn't a fascist, therefore we had no right to stop him speaking. Nobody ever gave us credit for that but we were actually we said you know, 'We'll picket and we'll heckle but you know, he's [inaud].' So he spoke about Toryism and freedom of speech and we let him. But then I decided to ask him a question and I asked him how about . If he believed in free speech as he said, how about us organising a debate in Trafalgar Square on the Irish issue. And he said, 'Don't be stupid.' I said, 'But why? Why can't it happen?' And all he would say was, 'It can't.' He wouldn't answer, so everyone was saying, 'Answer the question.' And of course, there was I, hand in the air, ... come back at him. Six o'clock news on BBC. And that caused *The Times* to demand the University to be closed. 'Cos what had happened? We had or I had embarrassed a senior Tory minister. Not only did you ever expect you know to be bullied, to like blockade, stop him talking but we did something far worse, we actually used democracy against them. We exposed a lie and they've never forgiven me since. The university never, the government, 'powers that be' have never forgiven me either; either Tory or Labour still hold that against me. I'm sure of it. And then of course, next time there was trouble they expelled me. Interesting eh?

I'm wondering now how [inaud] to look back at it? I mean, it sounds like quite heady times, quite exciting.

It was. I mean like, people say, 'Bob you're a real name-dropper.' I am but like, you know, I know people. Like, when I got expelled – dare I say this – one of the useless members of the National Union of Students who did absolutely nothing to protect me – despite [saying?] he would – was someone called Charles Clarke. And you know he hasn't changed much, has he? Still tends to be more verbose than active in doing things, yeah? So I've met quite a lot of the ministers, I've known in various guises. So you know, I think I am unique in that someone with cerebral palsy or other disabled person, are actually engaged in the activities which isn't really expected of someone who is a disabled person.

[End of Tape 3 Side B]

Tape 4 Side B [Track 9]

When we had our picket line and like occupied the university, it was 1974, so it coincided with miners' strike and we actually put some miners up at the university. And one night, while I was on the picket line you know, there was just a few of us, this huge lorry turned up. We thought, 'Funny, half past eight?' So we flagged down the driver and said, 'This is a picket line.' And then we said, 'What have you got in the back?' 'It's a new computer.' [Laughs.] So I – good job it's a few years later – I quickly said to someone, 'Run up to the bar and get the miners.' So got a load of miners to come down and – this poor guy who'd driven all the way from Swansea with this computer – we sent him back. [Laughs.] You know, [laughs] the university wasn't too pleased but the point is, after we had got arrested – the day after – when I got released, I got back on campus, went to public phone and got the phone number of the NUM headquarters in Barnsley, phoned up, said, 'Can I speak to Arthur Scargill?' 'What?' 'Is Arthur there?' [inaud] 'Who are you?' 'I'm a student at Essex University. We're in trouble. Can I talk to Arthur Scargill?' And he came on the phone and I told him what had gone on and a couple of days later we got this cheque and it was blank and he said, 'Don't go mad.' And you know this is in response to the support you students have given us during our strike. [Inaudible.]

In all this, did you maybe, obviously you were studying at the same time? [Both laugh.]

Somehow, yes.

I'm wondering how you felt about being very involved and in an academic place, whereas when you looked back only a few years, you'd been in another academic place of school, I'm wondering what your thoughts are about that?

That's a good question. I've always [inaud] being at Essex, despite all the political shenanigans. I think it was the first time I felt free, that I felt I was my own person, that the barriers I faced were actually few, that I had freedom of thought, freedom of expression, within the confines of... still got disciplined, so there were some sort of barriers there obviously. But in terms of my own development then that's where [I?]

became who I am. I actually grew as a person for the first time. So, you know, it was within the mainstream environment, that I became Bob as opposed to this 'spastic' – inverted commas. You know I mean, there were moments where I felt different – isolated – but in comparison to like being almost like in a goldfish bowl of a special school, special college. That 'special' was actually out of the window and that was so liberating for me. I've only ever felt that probably one other time in my life.

And what was your reaction, what reactions from your mother or the people who knew you from before?

Well just, again this is what... I just don't think they [laughs] really understood. Well I can remember going home like for the weekend. It was only literally two days before I got arrested. And they said, 'I'm glad my brother won't get arrested' and then three days later I had to phone, 'Mum, I got arrested.' [Laughs.] But you know again in [inaud], I don't mean in my [inaud] ideas, awareness were so great that really didn't appreciate who I am. And by that time I had a stepfather and I can never remember going home once, and I politics and how I was involved with them. And then my stepfather came home with a copy of the *Daily Mail* and the front page was this big story about Tariq Ali and I can't remember what it said but it was complete nonsense, I knew it was 'cos, you know, I know Tariq, and I thought, 'Whoops! Keep your mouth shut.' [Laughs.] Yeah. So it was almost like I was two different people. I always have been as far as my family goes; they don't know me that well, to that per cent.

And what about friends you became close within the movement or amongst the disability movement? Anything significant there?

In the disability movement the pull... I left quite early. I got frustrated with them. In the political movement yeah, I mean there are still people I see and talk to. One guy I met about three months ago, we had a meal together in Birmingham and talked about Essex and what we did and there's other people I still see from time to time from my past, yeah. And my politics still informs me and you know, various people I know. One of my colleagues of later years in the disability movement, her partner was a member of the political group I was a member of, so I knew her partner before I knew

her. So there's all kinds of different tie-ups. And after I got expelled from Essex – it was the same week – I got a grant to do a Ph.D. So I appeared in the press: 'Rebel student gets grant to carry on revolting' was one of the headlines. And of course many universities didn't want me because of my background.

Can you just explain what the university department was then? That you came to, that you were accepted by?

A lot of places didn't want me but I ended up in Birmingham at the University of Birmingham in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. I mean, I was accepted by them, then the university panicked for a week when they realised they'd got this radical student who'd been expelled from Essex. And when that was commuted to a two-year suspension... But I came to Birmingham and like, probably my last like, real laugh about it all is, apparently, I've been told that during my appeal, one of my colleagues that the disciplinary panel was talking and they said, 'Well, better not expel him because it's obvious that he wants to be an MP, so we won't want to hold him back', which I found bizarre. Very strange.

So you had a bit of a gap between Essex and Birmingham, or not?

Not really, only six months if that. About three months actually, moving from Essex to Birmingham. And that whole different starting again.

[End of Tape 4 Side A]

[Side B Blank]

Tape 5 Side A [Track 8]

It's Sunday 5 February. I'm interviewing Bob Williams-Findlay in Selly Oak and my name is Anne Austin. It's a while since we last met but I think where we got to last time was talking about your time at Essex University and then moving on. And one thing puzzled me from what you said last time. You were talking about Essex and how you were suspended; you had a two-year suspension after an appeal to a disciplinary panel. And later on you heard from a colleague that the university panel decided not to expel you because they felt that you wanted to become an MP. Do you want to comment on that?

Yeah. I think it's quite interesting how Essex seemed to paint two very conflicting images of me. One [inaud] Lord Annan, when he did his investigation of earlier student troubles he characterised me as a 'cruelly crippled student' who was actually used by the left-wing students to whip up sympathy. And I think most people who knew me – academic staff, students – knew that was just not the case. And therefore people – again academics – knew I was, despite my impairments, a very forceful and articulate speaker. I was on the student union executive at Essex and therefore I think they thought I was going to follow in the footsteps of people like, dare I say, Lord Triesman – who is now of course part of the government, and was expelled from Essex University and had to appeal like I did. So I think they saw me very much following in that kind of footstep.

And for you, looking back, what's your personal feelings about having been at Essex after your first school and then after Oakwood. What do you feel you achieved when you were at Essex?

As I said earlier, it was the first time I felt a person in my own right. I mean very difficult because politically I call myself a disabled person, disabled by society. But my view of what that means is that, although I am [inaud] identity subjected to possible institutional discrimination, I see disability as something you can either experience or not. I'm not disabled every minute of the day, right. Maybe at an ideological level but in terms of barriers then obviously I'm not. And therefore Essex meant that, in terms of actual disabling barriers, I think there probably were less there

than at any other time in my life because I was just another student who people related to as a student. The impairment – apart from my obvious barriers that I had to overcome – rarely came up, so it was quite a liberating time. And I think after my experiences at school, where I felt my confidence/self-esteem were hammered, I began to realise that I wasn't an idiot, that my views were valid and that I probably was intelligent. But even now I find it hard to like put myself forward and people say, 'Oh you know, come on Bob you're being self-effacing but this is who I am. I think I've actually suffered as a result, that is I think sometimes I'm too slow to say what I've done or help do. I'd rather like make the bullets and then let other people fire them or take the credit. And I know a lot of my enemies just don't see me as someone like that but I think I am quite a shy person. Underneath this shy exterior lies this [inaud] somebody activist. And I can like I'm better at fighting for other people than I am for defend myself.

And just before we leave Essex, I mean were there any sort of practical problems in your studying or did you need assistance, get assistance?

Despite all the issues like politics, which I don't fully blame Essex for, on the whole I think the vice-chancellor was pretty inept – if I [laughs] dare say it – but on the whole I think they were pretty good and pretty advanced. I mean we're talking about in the early Seventies and I think they did things then to support me that other universities are only just getting their heads round now. So you know, I give praise where it's due and like I'll always defend Essex in terms of its treatment of me.

Can you give any examples?

Well just the way it did the exams for me. It sat down with me and it actually devised different ways of assessing me, which took into account my impairment and that was very radical as I said. For [inaud] instead of like, doing papers like everyone else, I had to do extended essays and I was marked on that basis because they thought that they didn't want me to have amanuensis 'cos they didn't think that would have been fair to me to pressure me to complete. The extra time the amanuensis... they didn't think was an adequate... reasonable [inaud]. So you know, on that basis I thought it was quite radical.

And then you wanted to do postgraduate work and you applied to a number of places.

Well I started off doing an MA at Essex in Sociology of Literature and it was only after the first term that I actually got expelled, so I had to move from that course. So then I started to look for other places to take me.

And what was it – apart from the fact that they accepted you – that you were wanting to study in Birmingham?

Well Birmingham, the department would have given me a space to finish off – if I wanted to – the work I was doing at Essex, which was around Franz Kafka. I wanted to look at the politics of Kafka 'cos I felt then and I still feel, that he was a very cunning character who actually knew how to manipulate some people. He understood I think very, very well the idea of how to deconstruct a stereotype and various writers – left-wing writers – who interpreted him in that way and you know I found that really interesting. And there's a story which was written by one writer – I don't know if it's true or not but it stuck in my mind and I tend to borrow it in my own work – is if you want to convince somebody of how evil capitalists are then the last thing you do is paint them as people in top hats because that is too one-dimensional. So Kafka always subverted the images he used and I thought that was a really fascinating thing and later on I've gone back, I've used his story *Metamorphosis* as the base of a play that I've actually written [laughs] to do exactly the same approach that he did. I subvert the original meaning and transform it into a different set of ideas.

And were you able to complete your work on Kafka?

No. I'm afraid I feel a bit of a failure in academic terms; very frustrated. I didn't finish the MA because I decided to move forward and do a Ph.D, which I started. It was a complete shift because I wanted to look at racism in the mass media, which is quite interesting given what the Chief Commissioner in [the] Metropolitan Police said this year, a few weeks ago about the media and racism because that was exactly what my research in 1977/78 was, precisely how the mass media was reporting race and how it dealt with racism. So you know, I thought, 'Oh. After all these years someone

has actually picked up on the kind of issues I started to explore.’ So I started to explore that for my own work and I thought to help me it might be good to get a group going at the Centre of Contemporary Culture Studies. We didn’t only work as individuals; we worked as groups of people around themes and topics. And I identified another group of students there who were working on like, race and women and other issues. So we set up a group called the Race and Politics Group and we started to meet and you know, I get excited every time I talk about this group because personally I think this should be a documentary like. ’Cos you know, this is where I do go off on one because we pulled together a small group of people – see I’m talking about 1978 then – and there was Paul Gilroy who is now an eminent professor of the subject, there was Baroness Amos – as she is now – part of this group, and other well-known academics in the field of race. It all started from this group that I helped set up and we worked together and we wrote a book jointly and that is still regarded as one of the seminal books on race equality issues in this country. It’s called *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in Seventies Britain*. My idea for the title. And I was at a demonstration and I was given a leaflet and I looked at the photo and thought, ‘That’s it, that’s the cover for our book.’ So we contacted the photographer and he gave us permission to use it for us. And to me it summed up everything we were writing about. And it was a policeman in the forefront with the National Front behind him. It was the symbol of the state in front and the fascists behind yeah and to me it just like, [inaud] had everything there. So really my background shifted from an interest in literature to one of politics, to race and you know discrimination and language, and how language and imagery is used to oppress and discriminate people.

And in this was your awareness of disability as an issue or issues?

Yes. I mean it was strange and it was there, it was like I would often open up ideas, I was still outside the movement because I still felt that I had felt UPIAS had – Union for the Impaired Against Segregation – I felt frustrated the way I thought they were at... Though to be fair to them I hadn’t really kept up to speed with where they were at.

Can you just tell me when you were first associated with them?

When I was at Oakwood I got involved, met Paul Hunt and joined. So I'd been out of touch but I still had developed my own basic understanding of the social model, independent of them. So yes, I saw the connections and I brought them into play.

But you were more focused on the race and [both speak together].

At that time and then it shifted because [laughs] my money for studying ran out, so I went back to like, having to look for work and that meant I confronted again discrimination within the workplace. People didn't want to know, it was very similar to before but of course, I was older, wiser, more politically aware of issues, so I started to think erm, this is an issue. So I started to think more about that kind of politics but didn't really do much because there's a few colleagues who aren't politically active. Two of them were working on a Youth Opportunities Programme [YOP] in Brierley Hill. I'm talking about 1980/81 here. So I applied for a job and I went to work for them, first of all as a – what was it called – life and social skill tutor and I think my supervisor thought I was too radical, so she got me shifted over to literacy and numeracy skills.

And this was at Brierley Hill?

At Brierley Hill.

Was that a college or...?

No, it was a community-based YOP programme – the biggest in Europe. There are issues about how it would run because later, about 10 years later or so, the Trade Unions Resource Centre in Birmingham exposed the Tory group on Dudley Council and there was a lot of... 'funny handshaking' going on in the council. One of the 'funny handshakers' was actually the guy that ran this YOP scheme. And you know, let's say that he was very autocratic in how he ran this scheme and many of us felt there were issues that were never fully explained. He wouldn't let us join the trade union person and when we decided to do so he threatened to sack us, so he was a really nasty piece of work. I think I only got the job because I think he wanted someone like me to make him look good and at the time it was in my interest [laughs]

to have a job. But I stuck it about two years or so and then when they started to lean on us 'cos they didn't like us organising as a trade union and they started to question how we were doing our job and I think wrongly, and I said no, sorry, don't want to work for someone like you, and left. And it was then when I left... yet waiting to find a new job, I actually thought, 'Bob, what are you doing? You say you're political; you keep fighting about politics and equality but what about disabled people like you? You know you're discriminated against, you know there's institutional discrimination out there; why aren't you doing anything about it?' The people I worked with on the book, Paul Gilroy in particular. I was talking about Paul about it and he said, 'Well, there are groups out there fighting their own disability policies. Why don't you get back on board?' I told him about my earlier experience. He said, 'Yeah but that was 10 years ago mate you know, go and see what they do now. It might be different. They may have caught up to where you're at.' OK and funnily enough the same week I got a copy of *Disability Now* – whatever it was called back then – and there was an advert in it for a meeting with the Liberation Network of People with Disabilities, in London. And I went along, a bit apprehensive. It was the first time since I left Oakwood that I'd gone back into a group of disabled people you know like . I knew disabled people but not as a collective group, whether that was chosen or imposed group. So it was weird. It was the greatest day of my life because there were people there talking about issues I understood and I felt. You know, overhearing other disabled people saying exactly what I thought, exactly what I felt was, 'Wow! Yes, this is for me!' [Laughs.] And that was it, that was my moment of saying, 'Yeah, I want to do this; I want to be a disability rights activist.'

That was the day...

That was the day of the meeting when they were talking about the network. They were talking about the idea of setting up in London a disability resource centre. I went, 'Ping!' What a good idea...

[End of Tape 5 Side A]

Tape 5 Side B [Track 9]

It's interesting that having become political and having studied racism and so on that you came back to disability as a discrimination issue.

I feel I can understand that because the way I see it, it's that I think we have two identities. We have the imposed identity, where we're part of the disabled and our experience is often that people like myself who are born with an impairment, we get segregated from an early age, get put in an environment with other people who are impaired and told, 'This is your lot and these are your people.' But it's all external forces herding you together. You've got no choice in who your friends are, who you relate to and as a teenager I suppose a part of me still had this notion that in order to succeed you had to almost deny the other identity, which I've gone on to build. You had to make yourself as normal as possible. So ideologically you get swept into accepting the medical model or individual model and you've got to pretend to be normal to be accepted, to get on, to succeed and all that crap. And therefore it took me years to understand any internal oppression. I understood the external ie the barriers and prejudice but the internal oppression, created by the medical model ideology, took me a long time to understand. So it was only when I went back into the liberation network that, 'Hey, I am a disabled person; up yours.' These are my people' And that's why I talk about a dual identity that we're forever having to fight the imposed identity from a disablist society and the new identity that we individually and collectively are creating, by saying, 'Up yours! I'm proud to be who and what I am.' But it took me, as you say, over a decade to really understand that. And again I think my politics from mainstream did eventually help me do that 'cos I was able to draw on the black consciousness and women and gay movements, to make me understand the kind of political dynamics and transfer them over into the individual politics that I've eventually developed for myself.

And where did this awareness take you in practical terms...?

Oh great. I worked with the network, I wrote a few articles for them but mainly it was here in Birmingham – this is where I came back to live – and at the time there was only a local group, which I can't remember what they were called now.

The BCO DP?

No, it was West Midlands Council was it?

For disabled people?

I think so. It was before Laura came and transformed it into something more acceptable. But though they were like sincere, they were very much semi-medical model of charity 'help the handicapped'-type approach and I found it not radical, not addressing really the political issues I thought needed addressing. So I set about the task of putting together people with a more radical approach to be part of a... originally network not anything else, so I contacted one or two local people. And then someone showed me a newspaper cutting about funding from Birmingham Council. So I contacted the person who was in charge of it and said, 'What did I need to do to get funding?' And they said, 'Well, are you an organisation?' 'Er, no.' 'Well you've got to be one to get the money.' 'So OK, what do I do to set one up?' And within the next two weeks we set one up, wrote the constitution, got people interested, wrote a project application, applied for funding and Birmingham Disability Rights Group was born. And out of that we began to campaign for a disability resource centre, which is local – based in Yardley. So we succeeded in setting up both a campaigning organisation – BDRG – and out of that a resource centre that was there to be run by and for disabled people.

And when was it set up? When did you get set up?

1986 it came into being. Ideas... I'm one of these people that like having the ideas, like getting people together but then I'm not someone who actually enjoys doing the day-to-day stuff; I like handing it over to other people. So I've moved on. Come '85, '86 I was ready to move on, so I did. I stayed a member of BDRG but I felt you know I'd spent what, three or four years getting the organisation up, getting the funding, fighting for like premises and I thought it was time to hand over to somebody else and move to pastures new. And that's what I did. I moved forward and about 1990 I

applied to become a training officer with Birmingham Social Services, so I went from a poacher to gamekeeper.

And when you look back what do you think about that period...?

It was a very interesting, quite challenging period in my life because so much happened. I mean BDRG was getting up and running and becoming a real like forceful identity. In my personal life I got married for the first time, so it would be about really finding my own like feet as a husband and a parent 'cos my first wife had two sons, so I became a stepfather for the first time and started to look at adopting a child. So it was a very chaotic period, a lot going on. And it was exciting because I was taking disability politics into the mainstream environment of a local authority and pretty scary at the same time. So a hell of a lot was going on, which is why it can't be separate like, it was like four years of turmoil really.

And I mean, what were your feelings about getting a job in, if you like, mainstream and...?

I had mixed feelings because like, I didn't want to lose my principles, didn't want to betray my politics either but I realised that I had to like be professional in how I approached it. So it did cause conflict for me internally and externally too because people were quite 'gobsmacked' that I had got [inaud]. I can remember I had also become the BDRG representative on the British Council of Disabled People and also become like part of BCODP's executive. So I was involved in the movement, yet here I was a member of the authorities. I was at a conference – in Vancouver – of the Disabled People International World Congress in 1990 and we – the British delegation – went out for a meal and I can remember this guy John from 'up north', he said, 'Bob, what do you do? What's your job?' So I told him and he nearly choked on his food, yeah. He said, 'What? You're part of the enemy!' And I just laughed at the [inaud]. I think sometimes you've got to actually go into the enemies and educate them from within in order to make progress. And I spent two years trying to do that and I think I made progress, I think I got people to listen, to think about what they were doing. I think some of it was undone when I left of course but that's always the way it is. But I think it was a useful exercise to do. I think it made changes.

I was wondering whether you could you know perhaps spell that out a bit more, what kind of ways do you think you did make a difference?

I introduced new ideas about the social model. Think it took some years to finally like filter down. I think some would say, oh people introduced it after I left but I actually don't believe they're right, I think I played a significant role in that and made them think a bit about what SN did. I mean just an example was one of my early meetings. I went to [inaud] offices. They were going on about special needs and I said, 'Excuse me' playing a game, 'I'm a new boy here. Someone like to tell me what you mean by this term?' And one by one they all looked to the floor and didn't say a word. So I said, 'Right. While I'm here, until you can justify using that term, you won't, yeah? I mean people might have specific needs to do with the barriers they face but special needs is rubbish; it's just jargon. If you can't explain it don't use it.' [Laughs.] So there was that kind of challenging 'in your face' approach that I took with people.

And was there, were you treated...?

Interesting. Interesting that question. It depends. It was a struggle. I think this is the issue that needs bringing out is that they could not handle the fact that someone who they had a stereotype image of 'the client', the dependent one, actually being in charge or being a colleague and many struggled with that. And there's a classic story when I went to meet the manager of a local adult training centre, as they were called then. And I went in nine o'clock in the morning, went to reception and I said, 'Good morning, I'm...' and before I could get my name out she – the receptionist – was off her seat, opened a door, bellowing down the corridor, 'John, John, come quickly. I've got a client in my office.' And when they both burst back in I went, 'You don't understand who...' Of course, by this time John had me by the arm dragging me out, at what point the manager walks in and I can't exactly repeat what he said but it was something like, 'Beep, beep, beep hell. What's going on here? Do you realise you've got someone from head office by the arm?' There was red faces all round. [Laughs.] Yeah.

Do you think that your appointment was, for them, a brave one, a difficult one?

I don't think it was so much brave. I think at this time there was some very good people who understood the agenda; knew change had to come and were prepared to actually take it. And they knew where I was coming from, they were not afraid of me having a radical agenda. They knew who I was and they thought it would be a positive move for the department. I think the sadness for me is that the two people who really made that positive move quickly left the authority in quick succession; that left me slightly isolated. If they had stayed then I think things may have been really different but as it were they left and the one that came in after really didn't share their vision as much as they did.

So you stayed there just two years?

Two years. I was asked to rewrite the guidelines for need and basically, in my opinion, it was a cutting exercise, to cut people out of receiving a service. It wasn't user-led, which is what it should have been. And I said I wasn't prepared to do that you know, I thought it was a dishonest way of cutting the budget, as it would be detrimental to disabled, along with people... so I said, 'No. You want someone to do that you get someone else to do it. I'm not prepared to.'

So you resigned?

I resigned.

And looking back, how do you feel about that?

Same way as I did then. I had no option. They weren't going to change their minds. The people had no [inaud] put your need [inaud] organisation first, in theory. I think personally they set social services back 'cos they were bureaucrats [inaud] and therefore I had no other choice really. I don't regret what I did.

And you spoke in – well not quite in passing – but you talked about having got married and having inherited some sons. Do you want to talk a bit more about that?

Not much. I think it was one of those things where I'd spent most of my life on my own having to defend myself, learn how to live independently and I think it's an issue where again – not necessarily consciously – but there's always pressure on most people to conform to stereotypes. It is expected to marry; it's expected to have kids etc. And for disabled people sometimes I think it's almost like a double whammy of not... if you're not married, if you succeed in getting married you make yourself more acceptable, you're more readily seen as part of normalisation. I'm not saying that was my reasoning but I think in some ways like getting married was a real culture shock. And you know, there were good, good things about my first marriage but there was other things on reflection that I would actually question. And we did adopt a son who was disabled and that was a struggle and all credit to Barnardos – they supported us and it went well – and I loved my son but I think the overall pressure of work, of fighting for his rights, being a good parent and a husband took its toll basically on me. And maybe I'm trying to justify myself here, I don't know, but I think the real me got lost somewhere in the process of becoming somebody I didn't know, didn't particularly like really. And so it put pressure on the marriage and things went wrong. In the end we went our separate ways. Don't think there's much more I can say about it really.

[End of Tape 5 Side B]

Tape 6 Side A [Track 10]

I'm interviewing Bob William-Findlay in my house in Selly Oak, my name's Anne Austin and the date is Saturday 25 February 2006. I was wondering if we could go over perhaps some of the things that came up last week. You talked about writing a book, together with others and I was wondering if you could tell me a bit more about that initiative, that effort, how it went and how you feel, felt about it.

As I said, I was at the Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies and originally I went there to finish off an MA on Kafka. And then I got more funding to do what I hoped would have been a Ph.D. eventually. But there were various stages I had to go through and my interest began to develop around racism and how race was reported in the media. Now we're talking about the late Seventies, early Eighties, when really the issue of race was very differently reported to today. You will know only a few months ago we had the Metropolitan Police Commissioner talking about race and the media. I felt that the way in which language was used was that black people and people from minority ethnic backgrounds were actually seen in two predominant ways. One was that they were the 'enemy within', along with the trade unions, the left etc. Also that they were either alien, i.e. from the outside – could be a different planet even. Or if you wanted to use metaphor then Britain, if you like, was the host body that was being attacked by some alien-type disease that was undermining the body politic or the health of the nation etc. So you have all this kind of metaphors and the language was quite rich, even when they were talking positively. They would talk about Laurie Cunningham, the West Brom winger, as a black player. And that kind of language I don't think would be the, so... not so much acceptable but it seems incongruous now to the kind of culture that we [inaud]. And of course, it was the early days of the debate about multiculturalism that is now coming back with a vengeance and biting the bum of people like Trevor Phillips – who was then of course, questioning it; who was in my day, in my opinion, one of the pioneers of this kind of concept. So that was the backbone and that was my individual research. But one or two other students would come in to the centre who had interest in race issues. And I suggested to them and to Stuart Hall, who was still director for the centre, that we should follow up his work around police and the crisis – he wrote a book with others – that we should set up a race and politics group and maybe think about writing a book. The idea for a

book came from Valerie Amos – who was a baroness, now leader of the House of Lords. It was her idea to maybe write a book and what we did was we sat down and discussed what kind of book we were going to write. And we felt that the theme of – that I’ve just outlined, about how black people’s experience in the Seventies got articulated – was very much seen as part of this, if you like, Thatcherist knee-jerk reaction to a crisis within capitalism, within Britain. And like almost as if it was getting undermined from within – that British culture, British values were losing out – and how it got articulated. And there was almost a new right emerging in Britain; it wasn’t just simply far-right organisations like the National Front who was articulating racist doctrine but one could see that institutions within the state itself had race issue agendas. And many of those were starting to break down and argue what institutional racism was about. So we looked at the overall political concord that was being born and we looked at issues like education, we looked at how black experience being [inaud] at that moment panned out and those kind of issues. So each of us either worked as small groups or in pairs and we worked on various chapters. We also looked at some of the academic work that was going on at the same time and comparing their approach to race and racism with our own unique [laughs] view of how it was developing. Most of us were at the centre but we felt it was useful to pull other people in. There was a kind of ‘love/hate’ relationship with other researchers in Birmingham – at Aston University where John Rex had been writing on race for years – and people had gone that way ahead . There was a group based in Aston who did work. Kath Moore was another one who was there and a guy called John Simon who was very much part of their group but called to see what we were trying to do and wanted to work with us too. So we pulled John into our group and involved him. We also had Raghbir Ahsan, who was a worker at Rover, so he brought his experience being a black trade unionist worker at a car factory to our experience. He went on to be a member of the local Labour Party and a councillor. So we had quite a wide range of experience – both black students and white students working together. We had Hazel Carby – who was from America – join us. Her interest was in education. And it was also how Pratibha Parmar, who was interested in Asian and gay rights issues. So again, we had a feminist angle in our work. So we had quite a collective group of people working together. And in the end – we had our moments of falling out and disagreement – but I think Paul Gilroy more than me held us together and we all managed to write the book. And I think I’ve said to you before that you know I see

myself as the 'ideas person' who [inaud] galvanises but I prefer like, making the bullets and letting other people [inaud]. So Paul complemented that 'cos he was the driving force in the end to get the book done. And my role... not only did I help with the first chapter but I was the [inaud] who thought of the book title, *The Empire Strikes Back*, located the picture and you know. It's about 25 years now since the book came out and it's still being talked about, one of those seminal works around race, so I'm quite pleased with that part of my life really.

So looking back you feel...?

Yes it was good. I mean, I was joking last night and you know, some people might say this is bitterness but it's not. But I think it's quite funny that half the group are now university professors, some are leaders in parliament and [inaud] whatever, and there's poor old me [laughs], still fighting on at the edges. I wonder why that is.
[Laughs.]

I wonder, were you aware about your own situation at that time and do you see the disabled people as a group in that way at that time?

We touched on this a bit. What happened was I had left like, I got frustrated with the movement, I didn't feel it was moving fast enough. I didn't have enough contact with the right people 'cos I mainly associated with non-disabled people. But by writing the book on race and doing my own research about imageries and language, then a whole connection again with disability rose and Paul it was – Paul Gilroy – who I had many conversations about disability rights. And after my grant ran out to be at university I had to try and find work. And that really meant I left, if you like, the safe environment of the university to actually go back to the harsh disablist reality of employment – or in my case unemployment – for part of that time. And therefore, the issue of disability came like full circle for me. I had to confront the realities of being a disabled person once again. And that's when I slowly got involved with the Liberation Network of Disabled People and through them eventually set up Birmingham Disability Rights Group.

So this was a change in your life, like into disability activism more?

Slowly. I mean I did have a period when I was at Brierley Hill, when I worked on a Youth Opportunities Programme, where to begin with I was working with life and social skills. As I said that was OK for a while, 'til I started to raise real social questions with the kids and some of the other staff. The man at the top who was the local Tory councillor didn't like this left-leaning person talking about democracy, talking about rights, fighting to join a union. So I quickly got moved over to a more safer area, working with young adults on literacy and numeracy, which I quite liked – it was real challenge. I did that for about a year and that was [inaud]. I really got frustrated when like people like me who were slightly more radical were actually held back and people who were more ready to say, 'Yes sir; no sir' got promoted above us with no more experience than those of us who hadn't. So in the end I said forget this, you know.

Can you tell me a bit about how you got on with the young trainees or...?

Yes. It was quite a challenge for them and me. I think there was a time when you know, help [inaud] and people didn't want to do what I told them or [inaud] did occasionally use my impairment as an excuse. But in other ways [inaud] more positive, young people did accept me and I did stamp my personality [laughs], if you like on my work and some of the young people I got on really well with and found it a really rewarding time.

So yes, you look back on that as...?

Yeah I do, I think it was a time I learnt quite a lot you know. I had to interact, which came in use later on when I had my own stepson and adopted son to look after.

And then, again, you moved on to work with Birmingham Social Services. Can you tell me a bit more about that? You mentioned it last time.

Well no, I set up Birmingham Disability Rights Group and that campaigned around various issues. The main thing was the struggle to have a disability resource centre in Birmingham. And my role in that was mainly doing a feasibility study. So I contacted

loads of disabled people's organisations, held a conference on what a centre would look like, what we wanted to see happening and then we wrote that up and we got funding from Birmingham Economic Development Department to do a proper independent study. We had to draw up a business plan and that took, I think it must have taken about two to three years, so we're talking about mid-1980s now when that happened. And you know, I think I got BDRG and the organisation established. We moved around various offices but by the time I left we had our offices, we had around four workers doing the business, so I thought it was time I moved on. And I got offered a job to go to Birmingham Social Services as a planning officer, which I did. And this was 1990, so you know BDRG I was there for about six years in total, doing various posts. As a planning officer my role was to look at the services that were being provided to people with physical and sensory impairment mainly and that means looking at things like day centres, what was going on in the day centres. Also very keen to try and shift, if you like, the ideology away from a medical model to a more social model approach. So one of the big pieces of work they give me is the team would look at how we assess people and their need. And we rewrote the assessment plans that people used. Sadly the occupational therapist and the social worker went back to the old 'tick boxes' in the end but for a few years it was more the way in which – I felt then and I still feel – was the right way forward. You could identify the barriers rather than say well 'what's wrong with you then?' type of approach. Tick this box, I can't do this, I can't do that, I can't do the other type-approach. Very negative and very soul-destroying.

And again how did it go from day to day for you there. I mean did you have to fight a lot of battles?

I think so because I think within any local authority it's a struggle 'cos it's like trying to turn round a giant tanker; very slow, very bureaucratic, very much harder on [inaud]. It still is today; it certainly was then. And was strange because not only had I changed from being a poacher to a gamekeeper but being a disabled person meant that often people couldn't get their heads round this guy who was meant to be a client being actually one of them and a senior one of them to boot. I've already told you the story about being hauled off by people who mistook me for being a service-user and you know that wasn't an unusual occurrence. It was like, 'Who are you to tell us,

aren't you too subjective to be in this type of job?' Yet on the other hand I think the fact that I was a disabled person and I had developed my job in the disability movement – in disability politics – meant I could bring fresh ideas into the department. And I still get people even now say, 'Bob, you taught us a hell of a lot and we appreciate what we learnt from you way back then.'

And that comes from colleagues or former colleagues?

Former colleagues and one colleague now who I work with again. Yes, strange having worked with her in the early days and I am now working with her again in Wolverhampton. So it's a really strange turn around.

So in that period you've had a period of being an academic, period of being a teacher, disability activist...

Yeah.

And then working for the council. Would you pick out any of them as being you know... you got more out of it or it was more worthwhile?

Very hard to say. I mean I've said before, I hate like, talking about me in terms of, 'Oh look how wonderful I am' I certainly don't see myself that way. But I think creating BDRG is still something I'm really proud of because I think I have left a legacy in Birmingham which has gone on 'til this day, hopefully despite the narrow-mindedness of the present regime in Birmingham who fail to understand how important self-organisation is for disabled people, even for [inaud] job in the council. I think the legacy will go on in this city anyway. And I hope what I learnt and what I passed on will help me in what I'm doing at the moment. I also feel that being in the British Council of Disabled People was very important period too.

Yes. Can you tell me a bit about when that began and how you were involved?

[Bob sighs. Interviewer laughs.]

Yes. It's a very up and down history because when I joined BCODP to begin with we had slightly different takes on the social model. Like we thought more about ourselves as being with disabilities and that wasn't because we wanted to see disability as something we possessed...

[End of Tape 6 Side A]

Tape 6 Side B [Track 11]

The approach that we took was to see disability, not within the medical model sense of functional loss but in the legal sense that John Stuart Mill used when he write about the subjugation of women. He talked about women with disability and disability meant disenfranchisement, i.e. things that happened that denied them rights. So we tended to use it in that way and therefore that brought us into conflict with organisations that were part of BCODP. So for a while we stayed outside and then a couple of us felt that we were isolated and not understood, maybe we had to join the best in order for it to appreciate that we were on the same side really. So I got involved and became a national committee member of BCODP and worked in various committees and then joined the executive, where eventually I became vice-chair of BCODP for a couple of years. And it was up and down because when I was part of BDRG working it was fine, when I was part of the council I had to like, be careful and not be seen too public and then when I left again I could [laughs] reappear more as an activist. And over the years, just after I left the council again because Jane Campbell was chair. I got on very well with Jane and with Rachel Hurst, Richard Wood and the people who were on the executive. And what I felt most wonderful about that time is that we all had and understood the agenda. We all were happy to pull together and you know, got things happening. It was a time when like the various private member bills were coming and going throughout the early Nineties and we had like about three different bills. So eventually we had the Berry Bill and then we had a race to see whether the Civil Rights Bill or Disability Discrimination Bill would get accepted. I remember part of that process and I, like Rachel Hurst, was very much behind creating a new vehicle because up to about '93 I think, we had a Voluntary Organisation for Anti-discrimination Legislation. God! Doesn't that flow off the tongue: VOADL. How exciting is that? Not to knock the work it did but it wasn't sexy was it, it didn't grab anyone. So BCODP said we need to rejuvenate this and create something more 'in your face'. Rachel and I talked about this and between us we said, 'Well, we need something snappy' and we came up with *Rights Now*. Rachel took the lead on that but she was backed up by myself and one or two other people from BCODP and we got [inaud]. We worked with the MPs to draw up the bill and when the two bills had been fought out I worked with Caroline Gooding, who now is at the Disability Rights Commission. And we were advising the MPs on what

questions and issues that had to be posed when the Disability Discrimination Bill would go into parliament. I wrote the briefing paper on what was wrong with the definition of disability. So for me that was a really important time in my life and one that I really enjoyed. Then Jane stepped down, I took over for a year and you know, things got a bit tricky because then various people started to get burnt out, various factions started to develop inside the movement. Because looking back and being like who I am, I always analyse things, not just from a disability point of view but where is that located in my politics? And being, as it was, a defeat for the movement... paradox perhaps, i.e. we got legislation that disabled people would have rights but it wasn't the legislation we wanted or needed. So in that sense it was almost like kicking the movement where it hurt 'cos we'd failed to achieve the real goal we needed but within [inaud] it would have seemed that we achieved the objective. So we had a contradictory situation and the movement in my opinion has never recovered from that situation. So we started to see, as I say, factions beginning to develop and like, some people were saying, 'Well we've got to continue the fight', which you know I'd agree with but it was how to do it. And like going back to my left-wing days, like you could take a more pragmatic view or you could take the ultra-leftist view and I felt some sections of the movement actually took the ultra-leftist position. [inaud] say what we should campaign for is a repeal and replace the DDA position. And I said no way was that a sensible way forward because we had in place a government with a huge majority that most of society didn't understand, let alone appreciate the nuances of Civil Rights Bill versus the DDA. And to say let's replace it would be like saying let's shift snow to hell. You know, it would have been just as effective or ineffective – whichever way one looked at it – so I argued what we had to do is expose the weaknesses within the existing Act; chip away. Now I'm not particularly keen on [inaud] but sometimes that's the reality of what we've got to do. I think history would prove me right that that is what we've done and hopefully this year we're going to change the definition. OK it's taken a decade, I'm not happy but I'd rather that than be put in a corner making stupid demands, no matter how principled demands they were – and they were – but they were stupid because we would have been seen as just the 'loony left' disabled people who'd got no credibility and to me what was more important was to keep our credibility, get allies and fight on terrain that we could win from. 'Cos otherwise we would have demoralised people even more. So that was my stand and of course those that were more ultra-left in my opinion worked behind my

back. I knew they were going to get me out, so I thought rather than risk all-out war [inaud] movement; I actually stepped back and let someone else be chair. I took a sabbatical for about 18 months and then things got so bad within the organisation because of the factionism that existed I came back in and I started to debate like, where we were going. And in the end you know, I don't want to go into dirty linen because I don't think it would help but I did become chair again for a brief period. But again, the forces that didn't like my [inaud] the first time gathered for a second wave. And basically they used various underhand tactics – I'm not going to say anything, I said it at the time and I'll say it now I'm prepared to say it anywhere, any time – to tell lies about me. There were people within the organisation, they said we were trying to suppress a document when in actual fact that document not only had been public knowledge but we used 90 per cent of it to write the policy we were writing. And the 10 per cent that we didn't use, we didn't use because it was wrong. Factually incorrect. And the reason why I didn't want to be openly debated wasn't that I was afraid of debate or I wanted [inaud] for democracy but it made certain allegations that, along with what had happened just a year before, put them together and the chief executive could have sued – in my opinion – BDRG for slander. I could have gone to a tribunal for constructive dismissal and like got a load of money.

So you resigned from BDRG as well you saying?

No, this is BCODP. I went back in it. And basically there was a disagreement over like the chief exec's role and as chair I stepped in and tried to resolve what had been going on before I came back into the chair. And we decided that it was time to part right, we'll do it amicably and that's what we did. But if we approached my predecessor, which the group behind her wanted to continue, then the chief exec in my opinion – and I checked it out with ACAS – would have had a legal right to sue 'cos they were accusing him of all kinds of activity, which I investigated and found to be untrue. So it was a nasty time. So I used that and I used the fact that there had been other disputes to trump up charges against me and at the AGM, out of the blue they brought on the day. So there was no chance to put it into Braille or any other format and they only had one piece of paper; they brought a motion of censure and they read it out and I had 10 minutes to defend myself. It was a 'kangaroo court'. So I you know, I lost the vote and I stayed on a couple more weeks to help the staff like

cope with what was happening, as they were very angry at the very fact I was treated that way. Because the staff were obviously the only people totally behind me and then I resigned as chair of BCODP and walked out. I've only just rejoined in the last few months and that was about six years ago. So that was probably the lowest point for a long time and I felt really hurt by what happened but you know, I'm no saint and I'll challenge anyone to dispute this but I know what I did, I know why I did it, I can hold my head up high, I didn't do anything wrong. I don't mean I didn't make mistakes but I didn't do anything wrong. The history on all the big questions prove me right. That the way they took the organisation, took it to near disaster. They lost its credibility; I didn't.

Quite a painful time.

Very painful. Very painful. And I'm only just feeling able to go back into the movement and fight again really.

Do you find it possible to look back further than that final episode and see the kind of things that you achieved and...?

Yes and I still believe what BCODP tried to do and I think is trying to do today, is the right thing to do. But you know, there are some people who actually think they have a God-given right to control things and that they are right, only they understand the social model and that the rest of us don't. And throughout history there've been people and organisations who operated in that way, put their own sectarian interest above those of the wider community.

So you left then in...?

2000. By then I had various career moves. I left social services in 1992, October. And then I spent I think a year, maybe two years, in Birmingham working for the Birmingham Information Federation. That was a network of organisations providing information on disability-related stuff really, and it produced newsletters and it was part of a government initiative called the National Information Network Project. And you know, I was involved at a local and national level in that project and when the

money ran out there was again debates about how to take it forward. The committee decided it should be more or less wound up and the work handed over to Disability West Midlands. I wanted to go a more independent route but I didn't get the support, so I left at that point. I think I spent the next two years working as a freelance disability equality trainer, working partly for myself but also I teamed up with Sue Maynard-Campbell, who is a consultant in Wakefield and she and her sister had their own company which is called Equal Ability, so I became an associate trainer with Equal Ability. I dipped in and out of that from...

Yeah. Can you tell me how you felt about doing that?

Oh fine [inaud] seven different like companies, so we worked with like Bradford I think it was Bradford Social Services and Railtrack, and the Department for Work and Pensions, Barbican. So various different set-ups doing different programmes around disability equality training and consultancy work. So I did that in two chunks. One was about '93 up to '95, '96 I think, can't remember. Then I went into a local training agency to help develop two programmes. One was training trainers around vocational subjects and one was around delivering disability equality. I did that for about a year or two and then I went back into doing freelance training and Equal Ability again 'cos I found it better than working for non-disabled training agencies, which I don't believe was truly committed to the agenda that I wanted to work with. And I carried on doing that 'til 18 months ago. The last big piece of work I did was around training for Transport for London. [inaud] tiring; I had to go down to London about once a week and train like all kinds of people that work for Transport for London. I enjoyed that, it was quite fun.

Was it right across the range of...?

Yes, it was drivers, Ring and Ride – they're not called Ring and Ride are they? – they're called Dial-a-Ride or something in London. And like various bus services' operation managers. So it was a varied audience; that was quite good. Now, can I confess? I probably had to watch the Disability Rights Commission's video, 'Talk'. I must have seen it now about 1,000 times. I've got to the stage I can actually quote chunks out of it – don't put me to the test! – I can actually start having dialogue with

it; I've seen it so many times, so I got a bit jaded as a trainer, so I wanted a new challenge. Before I did a movie, did do a piece of work which brought together my training skills with my writing skills 'cos Sue got me to write her sketches which she used for a video with the Co-op Insurance Society and that went quite well. And then about two years ago, a local company called Configure and they wanted to do a promotional video – a semi-training video around the Disability Discrimination Act. So again, I helped write some of the sketches for that and appeared in the video too. So that was good, I enjoyed that. And then I thought I wanted to branch out again 'cos working for yourself can be quite a lonely experience. Like you can have a day when it's intense, lots of people to talk to, then you can have a week or two weeks where all you see is your wife, you sneak out at dinner time to meet her at lunch...

[End of Tape 6 Side B]

Tape 7 Side A [Track 12]

[Loud noise from tape recorder]

Sorry.

So I used to sneak out at dinner-time to meet up with my wife. Then at night of course we had nothing to talk about 'cos we hadn't really done very much except research or written something up and you don't really want to talk about that again. So I started to feel like climbing up a wall. And then I saw a job advertised for a Senior Policy and Equality Officer at Wolverhampton City Council, so I thought why not have a go at it? Tried to get a similar post twice before right when we lived in Birmingham, but didn't get a look in so I thought, well, probably won't this time but I'll have a go. I mean, it's very strange because, like, really after BCODP experience I was really fed up about that, fed up about being in Birmingham because I felt the movement in Birmingham had, like, also disintegrated in many ways and my wife, Cindy, who I married in 1999 - was together for four years before we married - and her job was getting her down in Birmingham, and so we were both very fed up with being in Birmingham. And then one day she saw a job advertised in Wolverhampton and she got it and so, that's her home town, so we moved back to her, to Wolverhampton. So getting a job in Wolverhampton was quite good for me too because it meant we were both, like, working quite near each other in the city centre. My job's fancy title is actually about advising the council on disability equality issues so, you know, I haven't really moved very far from my other experiences training people; I'm now developing policy. And with the new Disability Discrimination Act 2005, I'm working on the various duties to promote disability equality. It's also a job making sure that that, you know, reasonable adjustment in services does happen and I don't; feel everyone has taken it on board, can I say that candidly, so I'm still having to knock heads together and kick backsides hard, but it's hard 'cos I don't really have the power to make people do things. I can only advise them to do stuff. I'm also working with various groups of disabled and deaf people, which is both interesting and frustrating at the same time 'cos Wolverhampton isn't as advanced in its thinking as many other places. A lot of the things that I did before, say in Birmingham, I feel I'm having to start again in Wolverhampton so it's almost like *deja vu* in that sense. There is a very vocal deaf community in Wolverhampton but they don't really see

themselves as disabled people, so there's a political discourse [Laughs] going on there and it is funny because I went there I think they'd been, like, running hearing non-disabled officers round in circles, like threatening them with all sorts, and been like scared to, to do or not to do things. Well of course I come from, like, a rights background so when they start saying things like 'If you don't do this we'll organise a march,' and I say 'OK. If you want a to do that I can give it you, but at the end of day after you've had your march you still have to talk to me so why not just do that now, eh?' And of course they're finding that really difficult because nobody's ever come back at them and said fine, let's have it out, let's argue 'cos, like, we're equal. You say you're discriminated against, well I know what that's like. And it's a whole different dynamic so it's interesting. [? Both talk together] that point of view.

Yeah I was going to ask you what differences you had found in the ten years or so between Birmingham and Wolverhampton and, you know, both in the communities and also the way that the disability issues have moved on, well, or progressed.

They have moved on. I think we have come a long way on the last ten years, probably not as far as we should, but we have progressed [??]. And, like, I suppose for me as an individual it's interesting because I feel very much like ... I dunno, I want to say a fish out of water but that isn't quite what I mean. I think it's like it's a new age and part of me feels there's a new generation that should be coming up to take over, but they're not, there's a kind of complacency there somehow. So you've got old farts, if I can say that, like me, still have, having to, like, basically go in there and do a job and use our experiences and it's like a weird set-up 'cos on the one hand there's my peer group things like disability equality and talking about institutional discrimination: they're old hat to us 'cos we've been doing it for twenty years but to non-disabled professionals this is new things, this is fresh and it's that, that dichotomy that is so bizarre for someone like me. It's like, you know, I feel like a chef who says 'Oh this is something I cooked up earlier' you know, and, like, they say 'Oh wow, that's really good.' And, like, do you not know, you know, I'm just using my knowledge, experience from before, but to them it's all new work, new things and new, you know, and it's that that's a little bit both weird and frustrating really 'cos to them they're moving forward. It's good. But to me I'm, as an individual, in some ways I'm treading water and, you know, that's where I think the dangerous really. I

need challenging and deaf people are challenging, probably not in the way that I need,
to be honest. [Laughs]

[End of Tape 7 Side A]

Tape 8 Side A [Track 13]

My name's Anne Austin and it's May the fourteenth, 2006 and I'm interviewing Bob Williams Findlay in my house in Selly Oak. We've done quite a lot of talking so far, but maybe as one of the areas perhaps we've only just touched of I'm wondering about your experience of being, of prejudice and being ...people's attitudes towards you as a young person, and how that feels or felt.

I think obviously over the years there've been some greater visibility of people with cerebral palsy, but if I'm honest I think there are still a great deal of people with some prejudice towards people with c.p. I think some people might say well it's because of the impairment; it affects people in such a diverse way from hardly noticeable to complex impairments that are not just cerebral palsy but can be, like, hearing, sight, mental capacity, etc. But for me the crucial issue is about appearance and speech. I think really to coin a phrase that Nabil Shaban used - he's a disabled actor - he talks about body fascism, and, like, in many ways I think it is. I think we still haven't dealt with as a society the legacy or implications of so-called normality and body beautiful. And the fact that that in itself underpins in my view a lot of the prejudice and discrimination experiences that the majority of disabled people face. However, I do also subscribe to the view that there, there is a hierarchy of impairment and that people with mental health, people with learning difficulties and people with cerebral palsy are at the bottom end of the scale, and we get the brunt of the prejudice and the ignorance that is out there. So it is quite common to have people look at me, treat me as if I'm an idiot, and they come and talk down to me, talk to me as if I'm a child, you know. Having people, like, twenty or thirty years younger than me saying 'You OK, son?', you know, and all that kind of nonsense really, so I think it's still there but I do think the more visible we are and the more challenges we make then that, that is slightly making inroads. I think in general there is a problem though. It is actually going back to a paradox that I may have mentioned before. I think it's no different for disabled people than for other oppressed groups: women, black groups, gay and lesbian, etc. The greater our ability to gain rights and gain recognition, what that tends to mean is that we get greater access to the mainstream, and as soon as that happens there is almost a denial amongst younger people that race is an issue, gender is a issue or disability is an issue. It's as if the history of struggle suddenly disappears, and there

is no issue. And, like, I do not agree with a lot of disabled people, and this is sad, maybe because I'm an old fart, I don't know, but I get the impression that a lot of disabled people think it doesn't matter or I'm no different to anybody else, therefore I've got the same rights, the same opportunities. You know, I don't want to identify with disabled people; I don't want to identify with the disability movement, or talk about disability discrimination. I think we've got the same kind of issue within the post-feminist era with young women actually not saying we're equal to men, but in fact we're going to just be like men – fart and puke and get drunk in the same way that men have. So I think there is a real issue there in the future for how disabled people actually identify with each other. I think there could be some negative knock-backs in the future.

What about the position for young people today? Do you think somebody like yourself would be in a better position today as they grow up and are schooled than, than you were?

I would like to say yes and, for some, that may be the case, but I don't think the evidence necessarily backs that up. I would argue getting into mainstream education is still privilege not right. I still think employers remain prejudiced and discriminatory against disabled people, I still think the state operates within the medical model approach and therefore the benefits system and everything still works against people with severe impairments. In some ways, almost going back to what I've just said, the fact that we are deemed to have more rights, actually means that that I think people will say oh we can close the book on that: everything's sorted. And I think that's far from the case. I think young people often have to fight to get on in the world.

And we, I mean if you were a young person now... what kind of ambitions do you have for the time ahead?

I think young people probably have got more choices that I had and, like, you know, at one point - I hold my hand up and admit this - I felt Vic Finklestein overplayed the importance of technology for disabled people. But the fact is he was right; that the greatest technology advances, then the more likely it is that disabled people can become more independent, yeah, in the economic sense, and therefore the choice of

working for yourself, if you want to, is greater than say ten, twenty, thirty years ago. So opportunity and choice is greater despite what I've just said about having to battle. I think the battle must still be there, but the choices probably are more than they were in my day.

One thing you raised, talked about earlier was the fact that you adopted a disabled child, and I know there are difficulties talking about that but I just wonder whether the process of doing that, whether you encountered prejudice there or difficulty there?

Yes. I mean it was an interesting point in time because being married to a non-disabled woman, obviously people assume a lot about the relationship, and how much my wife would have to quote, unquote care for me, so what the hell was she thinking taking on an additional burden, if you like, of a child, let alone a disabled child. And that obviously was raised within the adoption process itself and a lot of the people involved, like the panel, there were issues about whether the panel would go ahead, but we had a very supportive and very aware social worker from Barnardos working. And full credit to her, what she decided - it was a gamble - was to actually get the chair of the panel to meet with us, to talk to us and therefore see for herself what kind of a couple we were and how capable we were. So she actually dealt with myths and prejudice by almost taking it head on, and that worked because in the end they said no, you're right, why shouldn't we adopt?

And that was quite a radical step to take, wasn't it?

It was and unusual and, you know.

And, and, I mean how, what other barriers yours, have you experienced yourself of, in either attitude or ...?

I think it's always difficult because, as I say, my first wife was a non-disabled person; my second wife is a disabled person but it isn't always obvious that she is and therefore the assumptions people make about us as a couple are very interesting. Like, you know, they'll say to Cindy 'Oh are you the driver?' and you've gone 'She can't see beyond the end of her nose, so no she isn't.' So, you know, it's again about

how people make assumptions on, like, basically false premises about how people look.

And in finding work and so on, have you encountered difficulties there?

Yeah. I mean, as I said before, most of my life has been dictated by discriminatory practice. I don't think I would have been this active within disability policy if it hadn't been for personal experience of discrimination and prejudice. I mean, I tend to, like, go along with people like Mike Oliver in that anyone can be prejudiced about anything. So, you know, if you look different you're bound to face some kind of prejudice. But I think what makes disability different is it's an active discriminatory process. Like, it isn't just about not being allowed to get into a building or get a job or whatever; to me discrimination is about how people perceive you and the knock-on impact that has, like, not on just what you can do, but your own personal integrity and values and how you can be actually put down by people attitudes towards you. And to me that is beyond prejudice. Prejudice is what other people have. Discrimination is actually what you experience. And I think Mike is right to actually flag up more the discriminatory factor than talk about prejudice.

What of your achievements are you most pleased with, most proud of?

I don't know; it's hard, isn't it? I mean I'm proud of most of what I've done because I think someone with cerebral palsy who actually spent – OK, I spent the first twenty eight years of my life in institutions with, which were for disabled people, but the next thirty years mainstream. To actually carry on, achieve, do what I have, gone where I have, you know, I think really is in itself, testimony to me as an individual that I have continued to fight. I have continued to try and get the most out of life and no-one can actually take that away from me I think.

And what other things, other ambitions you've got or things you'd like to achieve?

Yeah, I think, you know, through work and things related to work I still will be fighting for disabled people's rights, but as I get older I think I'm starting to realise

I've got to do a little bit more for me, be a bit more [Laughs] selfish in a way. And I really do want to make it as a writer, you know, I've been a poet for, what, forty years now, but it's only been the last six, seven years started to write plays. I still haven't made it through to, like, having plays put on and full productions, but I do feel I've got something to say, that my plays are, you know, offering something different and [??] approach to a novice, I think I'm still developing and learning and nurturing my skills in that field. I hope it's only a matter of time before a breakthrough. I have had a very short radio play put on local radio quite recently, and, if you like my baby play as I call it, the play that I first wrote, it's gone to about eight or nine re-writes and that, that's the name of the game. And I'm now working with an actor to actually develop it further 'cos they feel there are bits that could be strengthened to make it more, more of an impact on the audience, but the essential ingredients are there, it just needs a bit of development work here and there. I'm hoping that that will still see the light of day in a year or so.

And in your writing does your experience as a disabled person, is that important or is it ...?

It can be; it varies. Not all my plays are about disability or have a disabled character in it. Some do; some don't. The one I have just spoken about, 'Creating Ripples', is about a disabled person, that is the central character, and it's based on Kafka's 'Metamorphosis'. But where Kafka's character became more and more broke, like, and eventually dies, my character transforms from a non-disabled person into a disabled person who wants to die but then comes out the other end and actually then wants to live. So it's actually a transformation from what I saw as, like, a medical model approach to a social model approach and to, like, look at the same kind of story that Kafka developed but give it a different twist at the end.

Is your writing, do you think a sort of release for you or is it a teaching tool for other people?

I don't think either really. I mean, as I say, I've always liked writing, I've always liked poetry, I don't mind writing prose; I think I'm getting better at that, but play writing is something quite, quite different. And I almost, like, go off on one because I

just find it the most exciting, dynamic thing, you know, I love it, I don't think there's an activity I love more than play writing because you've got so many different facets. You've got the use of language, you've got the idea of developing a plot, but you've got characters who often you've got to struggle to contain them [Laughs] and, like, [??] but I often, like, I'm in the bathroom washing or what and, like, I hear my characters jabbering away to each other and it's the most bizarre, bizarre experience, I've got so many characters who just sit in my head and I know them, you know, quite well, and they're not one-dimensional. And it's a little like being part of a mystery, like, detective work 'cos you're finding out who your characters are and what their journeys are all the time. They surprise you and you, and [??] hang on a minute, where did that come from? I didn't think about that bit. And that in itself is something special, something that can't put into words. And I think that is why, even though people say well shouldn't you just write books and write poetry, you don't seem to be getting very far with writing plays, they don't, they just don't get it that this is something very different to just writing prose or writing poetry, you know. And the buzz I get from playwriting, I don't think I've got that from anything else really.

And how long have you been doing this?

It's about seven or eight years now, so, you know, but I accept it isn't. Some people write a play and get it on and successful. I [??] think it's about working at it, getting the right support, the right audience; I'm not ready to give up yet.

And have you had any reactions about this one being put on?

No, to be honest. I, it ... it went out at a funny time, it was ten to eleven at night on a Bank Holiday Monday, so I think it was the wrong time, wrong place, and, you know, it didn't help really. But those that have heard it, you know, like it even though it wasn't the finished article that it should have been. They still have heard enough to appreciate, I think, my skill, my humour.

I'm wondering whether the humour that comes into your writing is partly because in other ways you're quite serious and quite forthright.

Yeah, yes, it is interesting really. I mean, I've often thought about it and I think I've been blessed with the fact that my parents both had a sense of humour, but very different. My mum's humour was very slapstick and my father's was very dry and witty. But I think I've captured both in, like, my personality. You know I'm serious as a trainer and, like every day I try to use humour as much as I can, you know, drive my wife crazy at five o'clock or six o'clock in the morning when I woke up early ...

[End of Tape 8 Side A]

Tape 8 Side B [Track 14]

I drive my work colleagues crazy making comments and, you know, being humorous at different things. And it's just second nature, but people tend to think oh Bob, he's dead, [Laughs] dead serious and dead straight and little do they realise how wicked and witty I am, you know. When I did stand up comedy, you know, that's where I first used my humour. Now I did it, like in writing now, but I guess looking back at, you know, when I was politically active and made speeches I tended to also use humour. I think I am quite good at retorts, like if someone says something I can always come back with a one-liner. I think that, you know, that is something that I'm good at.

I wonder whether that's a way you've used to deflect people's comments and...

I don't know. I mean I can't remember if I've told you this story or not to you, but I can remember once at a football match when, like, it was like ten men and a dog watching my local football team in Leighton Buzzard, there was a guy who was standing like two foot behind me and all through the first half he kept saying 'Oh come on you useless bunch of spastics!' He kept on about them being spastics so in the end I got so fed up I just turned around and went 'Oh mate, do me a favour, I wouldn't have that lot in my bloody football team.' [Laughs] And he came down, he apologised. [Laughs] Yeah. Anything like that I try to use my humour.

So you're wanting to write more and publish. Any other things that, any other parts of your life that you feel have, that you'd like to develop or ambitions that you've got?

I'm not sure about ambitions. I think as I get, as I've got older, I've become reflective. They say that that as you get older you look more back that you do forward. Don't think I've quite got there yet but I do look back quite a lot over the past forty years, especially the last thirty years as an adult. And, like I have got regrets, you know, could break into song but I'm not going to do 'Too few to mention', and 'bit off more than I could chew', and all that stuff, but no, I suppose I've regretted not sort of going on getting my MA, PhD, the academic side. But I think that really sums me up in a way, like, it's almost like parallel roads; there's a road where you go up and you do it

and you live it, and there's a road where you sit down and you write it up and you tell it. And I'm [inaud]. And the trouble with that is that history isn't always kind to you. You know, histories tend to be about people and events that can be clearly identified with... To me history is about interpretation. It's about earmarking moments in time and, like, you know, we remember the painters, the writers, the figureheads, the ones that have left their mark in some obvious way if you like, but we don't really recall the people who probably did the leg work, the ones that probably did all the proper groundwork to make those people possible. And, like, I think that's my position in life, is that I've done it, but haven't really sat down and recorded it 'til now. This tape has been my opportunity if you like, to tell it as it is from me, and to let other people know what I've done. So in that sense, that was one of the motivating reasons why I took part in this project was to actually leave something material behind that was a testimony, if you like, to my achievements, where the PhD or the MA or this book or that book never got written, but at least I had the opportunity now to put it on record.

Thank you.

[End of recording]